

COVID-19 and Catholic Social Tradition: Reading the Signs of the New Times

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The Center for Social Concerns at the University of Notre Dame is an academic institute committed to research in the areas of Catholic social tradition and community-engaged learning and scholarship. The Occasional Papers Series was created to contribute to the common good by sharing the intellectual work of the Center with a wider public. It makes available some of the lectures, seminars, and conversations held at the Center. The papers in the series are available for download free of charge; as long as proper credit is given they can be used as any other academic reference.

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PREFACE: The first social encyclical is entitled *Rerum Novarum*, and is a text about *res novae*, “new things.” From the very beginning the literary genre of the social encyclical intended to comment on new developments and provide guidance in the face of new challenges. This commitment to ever-changing social realities is also an important aspect of Catholic Social Tradition, i.e. the interpretation of the social dimension of the Christian faith. In the gospels we find Jesus doing “situational theology,” which is theology respecting the particular dynamic of a local situation. In different encounters (e.g. with the Centurion, with the paralytic, with the rich person) Jesus would act in a specific (and in a certain sense, always “new”) way, even though the two main commandments of love of God and love of neighbor would apply in every situation. A similar drama unfolds in the enactment of Catholic Social Tradition:

The general principles of solidarity, the common good, subsidiarity, the commitment to the dignity of the human person, an option for the poor . . . all of these principles will be relevant for any social situation. But there is nonetheless a need for judgment and a need to respond to new realities and respect these realities in their newness.

The current pandemic is confronting us with something new—an unprecedented global situation that forcefully slowed down the global economy. What does this situation mean for us? How can we make sense of it? How can we reflect on COVID-19 given our Christian values?

Catholic Social Tradition follows a “see-judge-act” logic. The principles of Catholic Social Tradition offer important lenses through which to “see” a situation; the principles offer criteria by which to judge the circumstances we find ourselves in.

The Center for Social Concerns at the University of Notre Dame is committed to the enacting of Catholic Social Tradition. We are concerned with the application of the important guiding values of this tradition to concrete situations.

This Occasional Paper collects contributions from different colleagues here at the Center reflecting on different aspects of the pandemic in the light of Catholic Social Tradition. Fundamentally, the articles are invitations to see certain aspects and move to judgments that prepare appropriate action.

I am grateful to all who participated in the process of putting this resource together.

Clemens Sedmak

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CATHOLIC SOCIAL TRADITION & COVID-19: CST GUIDEPOSTS THROUGH CRISIS

Introduction

The continual refrain for the year 2020 is that these are “unprecedented times.” Living during the surreal time of a pandemic calls for guideposts to secure our footing along the way. Most organizations still need to function, even if in drastically different ways, and that applies to administration as well. Organizational administration is not what someone dreams of doing while growing up; yet, the journey of life often takes unexpected paths. Ultimately, people hope to make a difference and leave a legacy. They want to live joyfully and provide hope to those around them. That hope can be cultivated through institutions and the leaders who run them. In the past, I have had to lead organizations in times of crisis, such as while serving as the Director of the Office of Peace and Justice for the Archdiocese of Chicago during the September 11th events. Presently, I was already pivoting in my role at the Center for Social Concerns in the unusual position as Acting Executive Director before the fall semester ended. Now I have the added pandemic crisis to maneuver the faculty and staff through. Relying upon my strength of knowing the Catholic social tradition (CST) has been my guide to administration during this strange time.

The reality exists that leaders who were able to guide a community through a crisis were usually excellent administrators who provided hope for the future, such as Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Jane Addams, and Pope Francis. In contrast, the lack of vision, creativity and courage by leadership during a crisis can lead to frustration, and a striking example of this is the U.S. Bishops response during the COVID-19 pandemic. This historical moment provides an opportunity for strong leaders to be formed, especially among the laity in religious institutions. “The lay faithful have an essential and irreplaceable role in this announcement and in this testimony: through them the Church of Christ is made present in the various sectors of the world, as a sign and source of hope and of love.”[1] Using principles of Catholic social tradition as guideposts through the dark forest of the present global pandemic can assist communities in seeing the light of hope at the other side.

Now more than ever is a time for administrators in Catholic organizations and institutions to be evangelists for the Catholic social tradition. CST provides a path in good times and bad, not as a crisis ethics, but because the wisdom of the past helps to discern how the mission can, and should, be moved forward. Pope Francis lays this message out in *Evangelii Gaudium*/Joy of the Gospel, where he states, “I hope that all communities will devote the necessary effort to advancing along the path of a pastoral and missionary conversion which cannot leave things as they presently are. ‘Mere administration’ can no longer be enough. Throughout the world, let us be ‘permanently in a state of mission.’”[2] These words seem even more poignant during a time of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. CST provides

direction for mission-driven administration in which leaders are called to be realists with ideals. This sentiment is echoed by Pope Francis: “Challenges exist to be overcome! Let us be realists, but without losing our joy, our boldness and our hope-filled commitment.”[3] Four key elements of CST that provide insight through the administrative landmines of the COVID-19 crisis are human dignity, solidarity, subsidiarity, and the common good.

Human Dignity

Stay humble. We are all part of the human family. Everyone is feeling the absence of human contact during the present crisis, and the limits of our human condition are exemplified. Human dignity stands as a core principle of the Catholic social tradition. Looking at the decisions being made by administrators with regard to COVID-19, and its impact on organizations, this keystone element should not be taken for granted. Staff are isolated. The human contact with administration remains limited to Zoom, WebX, and GoToMeeting. As an administrator, mercy is especially needed, and called for, as the personal lives of staff are upended and they are left feeling more vulnerable about their human condition. People are losing relatives and cannot go to their funerals. Spouses are quarantined in their houses. As an administrator during this crisis, I have apologized more than ever before, and found that those apologies are easier. Managing organizational interests by putting human lives first creates a humbling perspective, and there are times that an administrator needs to swallow their pride during a crisis such as this. Recognizing the human dignity of colleagues and those they love most dearly allows the administrator to focus on the prioritization of what really matters in an organization: people.

Solidarity

Always give thanks to those you work with, especially in times of crisis. Gratitude needs to be exemplified by leadership. Now more than ever leaders are called to remember that they are reliant upon those they work with, and to acknowledge the vital role of staff in the organization’s success. No amount of administration will bring about organizational health and thriving without the employees’ contribution. Looking at the present supply chain issues faced by our food production system reveals this lesson clearly. The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church emphasizes solidarity having an intimate bond with the various CST principles.[4] The key point here is that each of us, not just the chief administrator, is our brother and sister’s keeper. At a time of angst due to record unemployment, an administrator needs to make wise decisions about finances, resources, time, and priorities, not just for the good of the organization but for the good of all who work there.

During the economic crisis of the 1980s, John Paul II reminded us that “The obligation to commit oneself to the development of peoples is not just an individual duty, and still less an individualistic one, as if it were possible to achieve this development through the isolated efforts of each individual. It is an imperative which obliges each and every man and woman, as well as societies and nations.”[5] All organizations need to seek the integral human development of each and every member of its community. Public health needs to be invested in as an integral resource for every organization. The crisis has shown our world that we are all in this together. When one part of our community suffers, we are all impacted. As John Paul II stated in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis/On Social Concern*, “We are all responsible for all.”[6]

Subsidiarity

Do not micromanage. Most administrators know this and avoid it. In a crisis, however, there can be a tendency to overcompensate and get too involved in the details. During a crisis, every institution needs to have a unified institutional response so that clear communication and solid coordination occur. However, the CST principle of subsidiarity reminds an administrator that at the lowest levels “. . . initiative, freedom and responsibility must not be supplanted.”[7] Micromanagement undercuts creativity to respond during a crisis and can create a loss of a needed diversity of responses since rarely will one approach solve all problems that arise. In a crisis, more than ever, there has to be a sense of shared responsibility in order to move forward.

Common Good

Leave no one behind. That is a lesson many families are learning presently. Organizational leaders need to remember this same lesson. Many mistake the common good to mean the greatest good for the most people. As Stefano Zamagni, an Italian economist and advisor to the Pope, reminds us, the common good is not about addition but multiplication. If you multiply by zero, you always get zero. If anyone is left out, the whole community or organization suffers. If an administrator is humble enough to recognize everyone’s humanity, and generous enough to give thanks since in solidarity everyone is connected, then one can be insightful enough to understand the common good is fulfilled when everyone is brought along in order to succeed. The well-being of all in the organization is interwoven and a holistic sense needs to pervade any organization through a crisis. The good must be for everyone, not just the leader or the most powerful. The interconnectedness of public health reveals the common good that one cannot be healthy unless others are healthy.

Conclusion

At the Center for Social Concerns, the faculty and staff connect students to suffering populations so that human dignity is recognized, solidarity is formed, subsidiarity is practiced and the common good is built. The current COVID-19 crisis has presented new challenges to center administration, as we seek to lead with the new obstacles presented through the lens of CST. Hope has been provided to our staff and students through this trying time by relying upon the key CST principles of human dignity, solidarity, subsidiarity and the common good that have been the center’s foundation throughout its history. Fortunately, learning to use the guideposts of key CST principles to direct our institution during the sunny days has sharpened our skills to use them adeptly through these dark times.

[1] John Paul II, *Christifidelis Laici*, 1998, #7-f.

[2] Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013, #25.

[3] *Ibid.* #109.

[4] Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 2004, #194.

[5] John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 1987, #32.

[6] *Ibid.* #38.

[7] *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, #186.

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THE PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR AND COVID-19

Writing from my kitchen table, I look out onto a tent camp of about sixty people here in downtown South Bend. In the midst of COVID-19, there is no indoor shelter available for them, nor are there publicly accessible restrooms anywhere nearby. The only publicly available water is a spigot at the dog park a mile north. Most of the tent residents are African American. What does it mean to encounter this situation through the lens of the preferential option for the poor?

The concept of prioritizing the needs of the most vulnerable in a community has deep roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The Hebrew Bible exhorts God's chosen people to attend to the widow, orphan, and stranger—the *anawim*—those in danger of exclusion, and therefore, of death. Jesus fulfills this covenantal vision of accompaniment by beginning his public ministry on the margins, citing the words of Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.”¹ He invited his disciples to do the same.

The Church's social tradition has built on this scriptural foundation, taking up Jesus' commission century after century. In his 1967 encyclical on integral human development, Paul VI recalled the words of St. Ambrose in the 4th Century: “You are not making a gift of what is yours to the poor man, but you are giving him back what is his. You have been appropriating things that are meant to be for the common use of everyone. The earth belongs to everyone, not to the rich.”²

John XXIII prepared to open the Second Vatican Council by urging that the church be a “church of the poor,”³ an ardent hope echoed by Pope Francis: “This is why I want a

¹Luke 4: 18-19, available at <http://www.usccb.org/bible/luke/4>.

²Paul VI, *Populorum progressio*, para. 23, citing Ambrose, *De Nabute*, c. 12, n. 53: PL 14. 747.

³“Radio Message of the Holy Father John XXIII to the Faithful of the World, One Month from the Vatican II Ecumenical Council,” (September 11, 1962), available at https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/it/messages/pont_messages/1962/documents/hf_j-xxiii_mes_19620911_ecumenical-council.html.

⁴Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, para. 198.

Church which is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us.... [I]n their difficulties they know the suffering Christ. We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them.”⁴

As Gustavo Gutiérrez has emphasized, those most vulnerable are preferred by God not because they are morally superior or always right or good, but because God is good, and they are human beings created in God’s image, and their lives are at stake.⁵ Systemically, their lives are treated as expendable in exchange for greater profit and power. The word “preferential” signifies the intense love of God’s desire poured into one whose life is at risk, much as parents would devote special attention to a sick child while loving their other children no less.

As his Salvadoran people endured extremely violent subjugation, Archbishop Oscar Romero said, “It is not a matter of sheer routine that I insist once again on the existence in our country of structures of sin. They are sin because they produce the fruits of sin: the death of Salvadorans—the swift death brought by repression or the long, drawn out, but no less real, death from structural oppression.”⁶ Romero loved all Salvadorans, and as their pastor, he recognized his particular obligation to act on behalf of and with those most in danger. He invited all Salvadorans, *including* those on the margins, to do likewise. People who are vulnerable are also moral agents called to live in solidarity.

Canadian theologian Gregory Baum has emphasized that making a preferential option for the poor requires that we first identify what standpoint we take in assessing a given ethical concern in society.⁷ Or, I might ask, “Where are my feet planted: At the center of power? Or, on the periphery with those most vulnerable to systemic injustice?” This epistemological lens asks that I become conscious of the reality at hand, aware of the circumstances threatening the lives of those most vulnerable, and able to identify my own social location in relationship to them.

Viewing the context of COVID-19 from the periphery, it becomes clear that longstanding systemic forms of injustice have generally been exacerbated during this pandemic.

I think, for example, of all those performing “essential work.” Two-thirds of frontline workers are women, 17% are Black, and 16.3% Hispanic.⁸ A higher proportion of Black and Latinx workers already faced systemic inequities in access to the goods necessary for human flourishing, like health care, education, housing, and nutrition. Consequently,

⁵Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Preferential Option for the Poor,” in *Gustavo Gutiérrez. Essential Writings*, ed. James B. Nickoloff (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), pp. 143-146, at 146.

⁶Oscar Romero, “The Political Dimension of the Faith from the Perspective of the Option for the Poor,” (Louvain Address, 2 February 1980), in *Archbishop Oscar Romero. Voice of the Voiceless*, pp. 177-187, at 183.

⁷“Option for the Powerless,” *Ecumenist* 26 (November–December 1987) 5–11.

⁸Hye Jin Rho, Hayley Brown, and Shawn Fremstad, “A Basic Demographic Profile of Workers in Frontline Industries,” Center for Economic and Policy Research (April 7, 2020), available at <https://cepr.net/a-basic-demographic-profile-of-workers-in-frontline-industries/>.

⁹NPR, “What Do Coronavirus Racial Disparities Look Like State By State?” (May 30, 2020), available at <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/05/30/865413079/what-do-coronavirus-racial-disparities-look-like-state-by-state>; Center for Disease Control and Prevention, “COVID-19 in Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups,” (April 22, 2020), available at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/racial-ethnic-minorities.html>.

Black and Brown people are experiencing disproportionately high rates of COVID-19-related hospitalization and death.⁹

“Essential work,” for many, means employment involving higher risk for lower wages, e.g., nursing home assistants, bus drivers, grocery clerks, and fast food workers. A particularly egregious case is the recent executive order to keep meatpacking plants open, even as many of these facilities have experienced COVID-19 outbreaks.¹⁰ 44.4% of workers in the meatpacking industry are Hispanic and 25.2% are Black. Despite federal policies severely curtailing immigration, 51.5% of frontline meatpacking workers are immigrants.¹¹ The preferential option for the poor means asking whose lives are on the line, and for whom or for what are they being asked—or forced by circumstances—to risk death. These human beings, however “essential” their labor may be to the nation’s food supply chain, are effectively and systemically seen as expendable.

Those with slow or no internet access and technological infrastructure are excluded from the privileges of weathering the pandemic by working and studying from home. The longstanding digital divide is now a gaping chasm. 45% of households globally have no internet access, and more than 42 million U.S. Americans, particularly in rural regions, do not have broadband access.¹² People unable to get online face significant barriers to the possibility of working remotely, online medical consultation, educational advancement, accessing unemployment and other public aid, and maintaining cultural and social relations necessary for survival.

The Catholic social tradition regards the family as the basic building block of civil society, but COVID-19 has resulted in a sharp increase in the rate of domestic violence globally as well as in the U.S. This violation of dignity incorporates physical as well as mental and emotional abuse, including weaponizing of the virus to stoke fear, e.g., through prohibiting safety measures like handwashing or threatening to withhold medical treatment.¹³

¹⁰ “Executive Order on Delegating Authority Under the DPA with Respect to Food Supply Chain Resources During the National Emergency Caused by the Outbreak of COVID-19,” (April 28, 2020), available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-delegating-authority-dpa-respect-food-supply-chain-resources-national-emergency-caused-outbreak-covid-19/>.

¹¹ Shawn Fremstad, Hye Jin Rho, and Hayley Brown, “Meatpacking Workers are a Diverse Group Who Need Better Protections,” (April 29, 2020), available at <https://cepr.net/meatpacking-workers-are-a-diverse-group-who-need-better-protections/>.

¹² Douglas Broom, “Coronavirus Has Exposed the Digital Divide Like Never Before,” World Economic Forum (April 22, 2020), available at <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic-digital-divide-internet-data-broadband-mobile/>, and Shelley McKinley, “Microsoft Airband: An Annual Update on Connecting Rural America” (March 5, 2020), available at <https://blogs.microsoft.com/on-the-issues/2020/03/05/update-connecting-rural-america/>.

¹³ Andrew Campbell, “An Increasing Risk of Family Violence during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Strengthening Community Collaborations to Save Lives,” (April 12, 2020), available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7152912/>

Families already experiencing food insecurity are now in an even more precarious situation. By late April, 34.5% of U.S. households with children 18 years of age and under reported being food insecure.¹⁴

Once I become aware and draw near to those most vulnerable, Baum suggests a second dimension of the preferential option for the poor, namely: A call to act in conscience. The Spanish word, “opción,” carries the connotation of making a steadfast commitment, of “pitching one’s tent.” It is, then, not an isolated decision, but a way of life. Once I become aware of the reality at hand, I cannot pretend that I have not seen the issues and felt the real suffering of those most affected. In *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, John Paul II spoke of solidarity as “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.”¹⁵ This depth of solidarity shares the same source as the preferential option for the poor: God’s love and passionate desire for the flourishing of each and every person and for all of creation.

What it means to make this lifelong commitment alongside those most vulnerable will take different forms in accord with each person’s vocation and charisms, the gifts given by the Holy Spirit at baptism for service of the church in the world.¹⁶ There is no doubt, though, that each person is called to make a preferential option for the poor, and at this particular time in history, there is an urgent need to pitch our tents alongside those whose lives are seen as expendable.

¹⁴ Lauren Bauer, “The COVID-19 Crisis Has Already Left Too Many Children Hungry in America,” (May 6, 2020), available at <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/05/06/the-covid-19-crisis-has-already-left-too-many-children-hungry-in-america/>.

¹⁵ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, para. 38.

¹⁶ Cf. *Lumen gentium*, para. 12.

COVID/PRISONS

For over a week my students' final papers sat untouched on the floor just inside the front door of my house. It was not procrastination that kept them there, unread and ungraded. I had heard that certain strains of coronavirus could survive on paper for up to 5 days, and this packet of papers was mailed directly to my house from a state prison in Indiana where my students reside. Over 200 cases of COVID-19 were reported in this prison back in April. Over 200 cases of COVID-19 were reported in this prison back in April, with 92% of those tested resulting positive. We know both testing, and therefore reporting, has been severely limited in prisons across the country. For example, the state of New York has tested approximately 3% of its incarcerated population. We also know that while the virus curve has seemingly flattened nationwide, cases have doubled in prisons over the last month, up to 68,000 nationally.¹⁷ My prison class ended early in March due to the outbreak and after two weeks of no communication, I figured there was no chance at any kind of alternative continuation of the class. But the case manager in our section of the prison resurfaced in April and apparently the incarcerated students had continued diligently working on their assignments as outlined in the syllabus. Having collected their final papers but being unable to access a scanner to email them, the case manager sent them through the U.S. Postal Service to my front door. So after a week had passed upon receiving them, now early June, I opened the package and started reading papers, the prompt of which was to focus on an aspect of our course theme—physical, mental and spiritual dimensions of freedom/imprisonment.

Charles' paper was at the top of the stack, and he provided a window into the heightened physical imprisonment he is experiencing during this pandemic. "In prison," he pens, "our world has turned upside down as well. At the beginning of this pandemic D.O.C. facilities were ordered to lock down, cancel visits, and block all non-essential staff from entering. Since then, the virus has ravaged [our facility]. Due to this overcrowded, rat infested, medieval environment, prisoners here are more susceptible to sickness and infection than elsewhere. Consequently, our gym and [other] parts have had to be repurposed to house hundreds of quarantined prisoners as they try to recover from coronavirus."

The second paper in the stack was written by David. It began with an exploration of imprisonment of the mind and spirit—his own. His paper begins, "How do we determine if we have enough? What is enough? Enough means a lot of things, it could be anything, so is anything enough? Would everything be enough? While watching American Idol one of the judges attempting to calm a really good inexperienced nervous contestant [said],

¹⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/16/us/coronavirus-inmates-prisons-jails.html>

‘When you realize you have enough this will become easy.’... I, like the nervous contestant, have no idea if I have enough. I don’t see myself being told by anyone let alone a celebrity I have enough. Some days I’m not sure what enough is, but in my unsuccessful attempts to get anything or everything I have always had this emptiness, a sense of loneliness that has never been filled, maybe the lack of enough is the reason.”

I stopped reading after this first page, mostly because it tapped into my own frailty and fear of not having, or not being, enough. But it also prompted a question as to whether there was a connection between an overcrowded prison filled with sickness and a lonely prisoner feeling unfilled. Furthermore, I wondered if this connection was reflective of a larger society that finds itself sick as a result of its never-ending desire to be satisfied? Pope Francis calls our attention to this reality in his *Urbi et Orbi* address, delivered in late March at the height of the coronavirus spread. Reflecting on the disciples imploring Jesus’ help amid a storm at sea, Francis offers his own contrition for a world whose deep sickness has been exposed by the pandemic:

[W]e have gone ahead at breakneck speed, feeling powerful and able to do anything. Greedy for profit, we let ourselves get caught up in things, and lured away by haste. We did not stop at your reproach to us, we were not shaken awake by wars or injustice across the world, nor did we listen to the cry of the poor or of our ailing planet. We carried on regardless, thinking we would stay healthy in a world that was sick.¹⁸

I had several windows open on my computer while tuning into the Pope that day, including my retirement plan account with Fidelity as investments were taking a big hit in the economic shutdown. Two of the stocks included in my portfolio are GEO Group and CoreCivic, the top publicly traded private prison companies. Prison is big business, and I participate along with the vast majority of my Notre Dame colleagues through our mandatory retirement plans in profiting off of prisoners. I am part of a group working with the University investment committee to create alternative, more socially-responsible investment (SRI) options, but this is an uphill battle as legally employers have a “fiduciary responsibility” to provide competitive investment plans for its employees. The more ethical options are often less profitable, though it is unclear if there is some kind of benchmark that determines what is deemed competitive. “Some days I’m not sure what enough is,” says David.

While my students are not serving time in a privatized prison, their facility is part of the same prison industrial complex that fuels mass incarceration and big profits in this country. The system has been well documented to impact people of color disproportionately, and so in the aftermath of the George Floyd murder and ensuing worldwide protests, SRI options have been included in the list of demands made by Notre Dame’s Black Student Association,¹⁹ seeking to hold the University accountable in its professed commitment to

¹⁸ http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/urbi/documents/papa-francesco_20200327_urbi-et-orbi-epidemia.html

¹⁹ <https://bsa932.wixsite.com/notredamebsa/upcoming-events>

racial justice. In the meantime, the market has bounced back and I continue to participate in our country's long history of profiting off of black and brown people. The theologian Walter Brueggeman writes, "Whether we are liberal or conservative Christians, we must confess that the central problem of our lives is that we are torn apart by the conflict between our attraction to the good news of God's abundance and the power of our belief in scarcity—a belief that makes us greedy, mean, and unneighborly. We spend our lives trying to sort out that ambiguity."²⁰

While we try to sort out that ambiguity, people in prison are getting sicker at alarming rates and more deaths are occurring. The question of abundance or scarcity is a question of enough. When our local organizing group, Faith in Indiana, negotiated with the Sheriff of St. Joseph County to commit to reducing the jail population, he admitted that very few of the inmates belonged in his jail. "One-third have substance abuse problems, one-third have mental health problems, and many of the others are here simply because they're poor," he told us. And then he asked, "But where else can they go?" It is a fair point, and an important one, because our community lacks the treatment resources needed for so many of our members. Jail becomes the de facto treatment center. So we've been working with partners across town to create these resources and provide access to them, and we have asked for and were granted the commitment from the Sheriff to reduce the jail population by one-third in three years. That was over a year ago and we haven't seen these numbers budge, until now. Due to the threat of COVID-19, 150 people were released from jail (nearly 25%) as of mid-April. Additionally, more than 60% of people in work release programs in the county have been allowed to go home, and 99% of police stops that would have normally led to an arrest have resulted in a summons.²¹ So in times of crisis, it appears that we are realizing what can be possible. Might we recognize that the world has long been sick, regardless of any pandemic, and that people with substance abuse issues and mental health challenges, economically poor people, and exploited black and brown people, are often living in crises? As social distancing has made us more aware of our fundamental need for human connection, so too might these creative actions for justice we are witnessing be instructive of the good news of God's abundance.

Continuing the COVID/storm metaphor in his March address, Francis offered, "The Lord asks us and, in the midst of our tempest, invites us to reawaken and put into practice that solidarity and hope capable of giving strength, support and meaning to these hours when everything seems to be floundering."

²⁰ https://therivardreport.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/the_liturgy_of_abundance.pdf

²¹ Faith in Indiana email, April 13th. We are seeing these adjustments in other sectors, too, like Governor Holcomb suspending evictions and foreclosures, and Indiana Michigan Power Co. suspending disconnections for non-payments, citing their concern for customers' families "staying healthy and well."

An invitation to practice solidarity is an opportunity to build relationships in one of the three following ways:

Learn/Teach: Join people who are incarcerated in learning about human freedom and the justice system through the Center for Social Concerns' Inside Out classes (for students), or teach a class in prison through the Moreau College Initiative (for faculty);

Advocate: Join students, staff and faculty in the SRI campaign to push the University in creating employee retirement fund options that invest in the common good, not private prisons; and

Organize: Join community members through Faith in Indiana to establish alternatives to incarceration, especially for our most vulnerable neighbors.²²

Francis calls each of us to be a participant amid the pandemic, and Charles models the kind of hope that might inspire us to act. Concluding his final paper, Charles writes, "Although this has become a dire situation and most operations at this facility have come to a halt, there is one group of prisoners who are demonstrating unusual resilience . . . When their programming stopped, they put away their books and homework and started making a difference. These men quickly learned how to sew and began making corona masks to help protect themselves and other fellow prisoners. Also, they divided into shifts and began working long hours in the facility's production kitchen making food for the 3,500 man population."

Charles was, of course, referring to himself and his classmates. David was among this group sewing masks and preparing food for fellow prisoners. He ended his paper on a different note, but perhaps related. "I can only hope when my time has come to have softened just enough to be the man I want to be," he writes, "a man with enough."

²² Contact Mike Hebbeler at mhebbeler@nd.edu or 574.631.5779 for more information on each of these opportunities

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CAN VIRTUAL SOLIDARITY BE REAL SOLIDARITY? RETHINKING SERVICE DURING PHYSICAL DISTANCING

Every era has its defining question and perhaps ours is this: Will this experience of physical distancing reawaken a real commitment to community? Variations of the “we are all in this together” message have become so widespread that one source, in an ill-advised turn of phrase, diagnosed a “pandemic of solidarity” spreading across the globe.²³ Solidarity has become the word of the moment. For example, the World Health Organization’s clinical trial for COVID-19 treatment goes by the name “The Solidarity Trial.”²⁴ If humanity emerges on the other side of this pandemic to any degree more humane, it will be because we have learned to embody—not merely invoke—authentic solidarity. But is it possible to learn embodied solidarity in a time when so many of our social interactions take place virtually?²⁵

Solidarity: an old word gets a fresh look

Early in the American experience of the coronavirus, New York Times columnist David Brooks offered enthusiastic adopters of the term “solidarity” a lesson on its etymology.²⁶ “There’s an important distinction,” he suggested, “between social connection and social solidarity.” We need both since they serve different purposes. Social connection lives in the domain of benefit concerns, hashtag campaigns, and sticky note window art. We express social connection through gestures that brighten the collective mood.

²³ The World Economic Forum in a March 16, 2020 piece which was later revised April 3 posed the question, “A Pandemic of Solidarity? This is how people are supporting each other as the pandemic spreads.” <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/03/covid-19-coronavirus-solidarity-help-pandemic/>

²⁴ For more about the World Health Organization’s response and clinical trials, see <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/global-research-on-novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov/solidarity-clinical-trial-for-covid-19-treatments>.

²⁵ Sociologist Dr. Eric Klinenberg, in a March 14, 2020 opinion piece for the New York Times, argued “we need solidarity, not just social distancing.” Defining solidarity as “the interdependence between individuals and across groups,” Klinenberg writes: “solidarity motivates us to promote public health, not just our own personal security. It keeps us from hoarding medicine, toughing out a cold in the workplace or sending a sick child to school.” <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/14/opinion/coronavirus-social-distancing.html>

²⁶ David Brooks, “Screw this Virus! We had to be set apart to feel together,” March 19, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/19/opinion/coronavirus-isolation.html>

If social connection uplifts us, solidarity instead digs deep. Solidarity resides in that part of the human soul where gritty, no-matter-what love resides. Solidarity means doing, not just feeling. Brooks categorizes solidarity as an “active virtue.” Like any good journalist, Brooks cites his sources: “This concept of solidarity grows out of Catholic social teaching. It starts with a belief in the infinite dignity of each human person but sees people embedded in webs of mutual obligation—to one another and to all creation. It celebrates the individual and the whole together, and to the nth degree.”²⁷

Brooks gets it right in tracing the concept of solidarity to the Catholic Social Tradition, which in turn arises from the life and teaching of Jesus. Martin Luther King, Jr., in his final public address before his assassination, turns to Jesus’s parable of the Good Samaritan for an image of genuine solidarity. King chides well-wishers who profess from afar sympathy for racial equality without personally implicating themselves in the very real work such a goal would require. Warning against being “compassionate by proxy,” King praises the Good Samaritan who, by contrast, “got down with him, administered first aid, and helped the man in need. Jesus ended up saying, this was the good man, this was the great man, because he had the capacity to project the ‘I’ into the ‘thou,’ and to be concerned about his brother.”²⁸ Since the Patristic era, the Good Samaritan has been interpreted as an icon of Jesus himself: moved by sheer compassion for wounded humanity, God in the person of Jesus came to our side as one of us to heal us. And the healing humanity most needed was for our broken solidarity with God and with each other to be restored.

Embodied solidarity during physical distancing?

The experience of a pandemic shocks us into realizing just how dramatically our lives and germs and livelihoods intersect across the globe. In hyper-scheduled, individual achievement-oriented societies, we tend to discount the effect our actions have on others and vice versa. As Mother Teresa put it, “we have forgotten that we belong to each other—that man, that woman, that child is my brother or my sister.”²⁹ Re-remembering our common belonging is not simply an intellectual or even emotional exercise; it takes doing. Cultivating solidarity as an “active virtue” (Brooks) requires concrete practices such as engaging in service, which typically has meant situating ourselves physically alongside others to form relationships with individuals who often occupy different literal and metaphorical places in society.

²⁷ Brooks’s definition clearly draws on Pope John Paul II’s classic treatment of solidarity, formulated in his 1987 *Sollicitudo rei socialis*: “This then is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.”

²⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech on April 3, 1968 at the Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee the day before he was shot. The text of his address can be found at <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm>.

²⁹ Mother Teresa, Brain Quote, accessed May 14, 2020, https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/mother_teresa_107032

Authentic human interaction across the visible and invisible social barriers that divide us is a central ingredient in social solidarity. So, is it even possible to develop solidarity through service in a time of physical distancing? Technology offers new ways to connect that would have been unthinkable even a generation ago, but technologically-mediated relationships also present inherent limitations. Neuroscience shows that the brain processes images of people on a screen differently than when we interact with people who are physically present to us. As evidence of the difference, consider the fatigue you likely feel after a Zoom group call compared to an in-person meeting or class.³⁰ While our social networks may change overnight, the neural circuitry of our brains has taken millions of years to develop. Evolutionarily speaking, we haven't come close to adapting to the neuro-physiological landscape of the social media age. In the short-term, some of our brain's responses to technologically-mediated communication have even proven maladaptive.³¹

It is one thing to FaceTime with a friend or relative as a way of staying in touch, but strictly virtual service often means using technology to connect with an organization or individuals with whom we have had no in-person interaction.³² We intellectually recognize, of course, that the pixels on our computer screen represent a real person, but does this correlate to a deeper recognition of the humanity of another person, or in Dr. King's phrase, the ability to see the "I in the 'thou'?"³³

The internet excels at providing platforms for observing events, donating money, and providing commentary, which points to what tech-author Doug Bierend calls "the real potential for solidarity in virtual communities."³⁴ But in Bierend's nuanced assessment, the

³⁰Julia Sklar, "'Zoom fatigue' is taxing the brain. Here's why that happens," National Geographic, April 24, 2020. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2020/04/coronavirus-zoom-fatigue-is-taxing-the-brain-here-is-why-that-happens/>.

³¹The authors credit University of Notre Dame's Dr. Nancy Michael, professor of Neuroscience and Behavior, for sharing her insights via conversation and in co-teaching settings. Further, Mari K. Swingle examines the relationship between new technology and the evolving human brain in her book: *i-Minds : how and why constant connectivity is rewiring our brains and what to do about it*, ProQuest [Firm] Gabriola Island, BC, Canada : New Society Publishers, 2019.

³²For more resources on the emerging field of virtual volunteering, see Indiana Campus Compact's COVID-19 and the Engaged Campus and Portland State's Community based learning in times of social distancing and quarantine.

³³The "I/thou" expression is not original to Dr. King, originating in the work of Martin Buber and other personalist philosophers of the early-middle part of the 20th century. Doug Bierend, "The Real Potential for Solidarity in Virtual Communities," January 20, 2017

³⁴Doug Bierend, "The Real Potential for Solidarity in Virtual Communities," January 20, 2017, Medium, <https://immerse.news/how-virtual-communities-could-enable-real-solidarity-61077e1be008>. Bierend concludes: "At the end of the day, any form of solidarity pertains to something that happens in physical space — a lack of food or clean water, beatings or killings perpetrated by state power, a lack of jobs or the theft of resources, and so on. While there are many interesting technical possibilities for providing material, moral and other forms of support through networked devices, lasting community, accountability, and therefore solidarity are generated where people meet face-to-face." As one example of a sustained examination of online communication, see Hatana Hannan Eljarn's published dissertation, "Computer mediated communication, social networking sites & maintaining relationships," (University of Manchester, 2015).

acid test for genuine solidarity among virtual communities consists of mobilizing people to make concrete commitments with tangible results in physical space. Distinct from social connection, solidarity is necessarily mutual and embodied—in other words, solidarity arises from sustained interaction that carries the capacity for real, even if small, effect on both parties.³⁵ This is not to say that the goal of solidarity is to “change” the other person. Rather, it means solidarity is a spiritual practice that should bear tangible fruits. Pope Francis underscored an almost empirical aspect of solidarity in his April 20th *Urbi et Orbi* message addressing the coronavirus pandemic, noting that we should be able to give “further proof of solidarity” through “innovative solutions.”³⁶

Pope Francis’s emphasis on “solutions” likewise points to a structural dimension of solidarity. In other words, solidarity is not only a quality of interpersonal friendship; solidarity also pertains to the kind of commitments social institutions and civil authorities should exhibit in a society oriented toward the common good. Particularly in the case of a global health crisis, individual action alone cannot address root causes and widespread effects. Governments, in keeping with the principle of subsidiarity, must take responsibility as well for ensuring the health and well-being of private citizens.³⁷

Practical solidarity while serving remotely

Virtual service presents challenges for developing solidarity because of the absence of physical proximity. But just as physical proximity does not guarantee that we will develop solidarity with those around us, the reverse is also true: the absence of physical proximity does not foreclose the possibility of cultivating meaningful relationships with others through virtual means. Rachel Hatch with the Institute for the Future postulates that the most crucial element in authentic communication is mental presence more than physical presence. Hatch writes: “Attentional proximity is all about paying attention to the same thing, at the same time, with all of the social cues that let others know where your focus is. It’s the social experience of a reciprocal turn toward each other, and it can happen irrespective of physical distance.”³⁸

Attentional proximity, whether in virtual or in-person communication, begins first of all with interior attentiveness. Identifying our own doubts, questions, and assumptions helps us to become aware of our perspectives on social issues and opens us to new and broader

³⁵ Marcus Mescher, in his *Ethics of Encounter: Christian Neighbor Love as a Practice of Solidarity*, situates Christian solidarity between two contrasting extremes: “Building a culture of encounter will require a shift from tolerance that creates distance to the tenderness that generates intimacy, and a move from the unilateral gift of charity to the mutuality of solidarity,” (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2020), p. 34.

³⁶ Pope Francis’s “*Urbi et Orbi* - Easter 2020” text is available online at http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/urbi/documents/papa-francesco_20200412_urbi-et-orbi-pasqua.html.

³⁷ See Pope Francis’s 2015 *Laudato Si’* 157: “Society as a whole, and the state in particular, are obliged to defend and promote the common good.”

³⁸ Rachel Hatch, “From Telepresence to Copresence,” Institute for the Future, October 28, 2014, <http://www.iftf.org/future-now/article-detail/from-telepresence-to-copresence/>.

understandings. As with all relationships, we must develop self-awareness of what we bring to a relationship and what we stand to learn from our interactions with others. For example, as we have learned from the work of Hopeprint in Syracuse, an organization that works with refugee families in Syracuse, New York, if we join a Zoom call with an existing community of resettled refugee women without sensitivity for how our participation might affect the group, we are far more likely to be experienced as an intruder. However, if we enter with intentionality, mentored and honed by the gatekeepers of the intimate community made temporarily virtual, we have a pathway towards authentic connection.

But we are not intentional simply by *intending* to be so. Rather, we become intentional by concretely doing certain things that focus our minds and bodies on the person or task before us. In virtual conversation, this means closing background tabs, putting cell phones out of sight, paying more attention to the words we use, and showing the same kind of respect for a person on a screen or on the phone as we would if we were meeting face-to-face, or focusing on a task as single-mindedly as if we were in a common workspace with our colleagues. Journaling and other reflective practices inherent in most community-based courses are especially necessary in a virtual volunteering context as tools to develop awareness of injustices and how a given situation demands a personal or structural response.

Virtual service tends to be more project-based rather than relationship-based. It is common for project-based service (e.g. database maintenance or grant writing) to feel less meaningful or rewarding than building one-on-one relationships (e.g. being a camp counselor or leading group crafts). If relational service can foster experiences of empathy and kinship among humanity, project-based service offers a unique invitation. Focusing on projects or tasks requires a spirit of humility and openness to what is needed. It asks us to invest in work that is often unseen, potentially not attributed to our name. This kind of work tends to not yield photos or impressive stories to post on social media or in conversation, yet these same tasks push us to question, “Unto what end do I serve? For myself or for my neighbor?” As we take on this posture, we will begin to see how research, data entry, and other projects that may feel menial are imbued with meaning. We begin to witness the realities that those data points connect to in real human lives, developing a deeper awareness of and sensitivity to the situations of others far removed from our own immediate circumstances. Additionally, remote service connects students with staff and workers on the frontlines who can provide a wealth of information about a given social issue and often serve as inspiring role models for embodied practices of solidarity.

Solidarity as a spiritual practice

We have put forth a definition of solidarity as embodied practices, even through virtual avenues, that provide the opportunity for mutual transformation. The necessarily outward dimension of solidarity correlates to an interior dimension as well, reflective of the integral relationship between love of God and love of neighbor. Catholicism’s regard for the Church as the Body of Christ likewise denotes a profound connection among humanity across both time and space. In this view, even seemingly individual, private actions such as prayer and fasting can be powerful forms of solidarity. Solidarity, then, can extend far beyond the length of any particular service program and is not bound by physical or even virtual limits. The design of community-based courses should pay attention to creating spaces for

ongoing reflection post-service and how that experience contributes to the student's ability to, as theologian Marcus Mescher describes, better "recognize solidarity as part of their identity and purpose."³⁹

The question lies open before us whether or not this experience of physical distancing will lead to a deeper commitment to build and heal our communities, both locally and globally. With the term "solidarity" trending in our news feeds, the challenge remains ours to bring to reality intentional, embodied practices of solidarity.

³⁹ Marcus Mescher, *The Ethics of Encounter: Christian Neighbor Love as a Practice of Solidarity* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2020), p. 68. "Each Christian individual and community should recognize solidarity as a part of their identity and purpose, an essential practice for realizing right relationship with family, friends, and neighbors that includes going out of one's way in order to draw near to others in need."

WHAT MIGHT SUCCESS LOOK LIKE NOW?

In the Gospel according to John, Mary Magdalene goes to Jesus' tomb soon after he is crucified. She finds the tomb empty and she starts bawling. Jesus was tortured and killed, the movement of love and inclusivity that he started is dead, the apostles are all in hiding, and the one place she hopes to find a scrap of comfort appears to have been desecrated. As she cries, she bends and peers inside the tomb. It is like she cannot help herself—she, like doubting Thomas, cannot really believe this is happening and has to check again that it is really empty. She sees two figures in the tomb and they ask, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him” (Jn 20:13).

Mary still thinks she knows how things will go—what a success is, and what a failure is. Her expectations a few weeks before the crucifixion were that things looked pretty promising for Jesus and his followers. Now though, the tomb is empty, Jesus is gone and expectations are as low as they can go. “Success” is usually defined as ‘achieving a desired aim,’ and failure is clearly the inability to do so. Mary is looking at what appears to be a colossal failure.

Like many of us, Mary thought she knew what success looked like and what failure looked like. But the resurrection created a paradigm shift, a term attributed in the 1970s to physicist Thomas Kuhn. A paradigm shift occurs when the dominant model under which the ‘normal’ operates is rendered incompatible with new phenomena, which facilitates a new theory or paradigm. What the resurrection *looked like* to Mary Magdalene on that morning was a giant failure. Instead, it was the dawn of the realization that the old version of success had been blown out of the water, or tomb, if you will. The resurrection surpassed all expectations of success—Christ had risen, death did not prevail, love had won, the kingdom of God would now be forever at hand.

Today’s pandemic offers a paradigm shift for what success for undergraduate students looks like. The current pandemic has cut off access to most internships, immersions, study abroad, and research opportunities, etc. that were previously considered stepping stones to a successful post graduate life and career. Furthermore, image, looks, and status do not hold the grinding power that they did a few months ago. Today those things only go so far when one needs basic necessities like toilet paper and gas, or help with homework, or a nurse for CT scans and bloodwork. A paradigm shift is occurring—frontline workers are now ‘heroes,’ they are now the ‘essential’ ones helping the world ‘succeed.’

Life as we knew it will not be coming back soon, if at all. Schools, work places, social gatherings, and travel will be impacted for a long time, particularly with a second wave of the virus likely hitting before a vaccine is accessible. In short, the ramifications of COVID-19 will be long and broad. The world’s interconnectedness and interdependence

has changed, so what might success look like now? And how might one attain that?

A source and a path for this new model of success is offered by a simple attitude: radical compassion. The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh wrote that practicing compassion results in peace in society. This internal practice “minimize(s) the number of wars between this and that feeling, or this and that perception, and we can then have real peace with others” (*Love in Action*, 70). When people are more compassionate, they have less fear, are more authentic, creative, adaptable, flexible, and collaborative. Imagine if everyone were more loving, creative, collaborative, etc. What new technology could arise? Business models, engineering projects, political movements, jobs? With previous models of “success” now rendered moot, the signs of the times offer an opportunity to create new images of what success looks like, and radical compassion is a crucial element.

Radical compassion is a constitutive aspect of the Catholic faith. Examples are found in the Old and New Testaments (Heb 4:15, Mt 20:30-34, Mk 6:34, Ps 112:3-5, Col 3:12, 2 Cor 1:3-4). They are found in Catholic Social Teaching texts from *Rerum Novarum* (1891) to *Laudato Si* (2015). The United States Catholic Conference of Bishops urges people to employ compassion in a concrete way, “not just abstract principles, but a framework for everyday action.” Pope Francis notes compassion’s necessity in *Laudato Si*: “A sense of deep communion with the rest of nature cannot be real if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion and concern for our fellow human beings” (91). And theologian Marcus Mescher writes, “compassion is a whole-hearted full-blown immersion into the human condition. Compassion draws near the other as equals; this recognition of equality is essential for solidarity that can heal personal wounds and social breaches” (*Ethics of Encounter*, 107).

An essential aspect of compassion is that one must embody it within oneself before one can fruitfully practice it with others (2 Cor 1:3-4, 1 Pet 4:10). If one inwardly harbors self judgement, shame, anger, and fear, the fruits of compassion towards others will be meager and short lived (Mt 13:5-6). Without a firm foundation of kindness and willingness to tend to one’s own wounding emotions, embodied compassion for others is not sustainable. Therefore, self compassion is critical before one can practice compassion with others and thereby enact new models of success. This may all sound abstract and idealistic, but there are concrete ways to practice compassion and self compassion.

Tara Brach is a psychologist, author, and teacher of meditation. She has written extensively about the development of radical self compassion through the practice of RAIN, which stands for Recognize, Allow, Investigate, and Nurture. Here is a brief explanation of her process:

R—Recognize What’s Going On: Recognizing means acknowledging the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that are affecting you. This can be done with a simple mental whisper, noting what you are most aware of.

A—Allow the Experience to be There, Just as It Is: Allowing means letting sensations you have recognized simply be there without trying to fix or avoid anything. You might recognize fear, and allow by mentally whispering “it’s ok” or “this belongs” or “yes.” Allowing creates a pause that makes it possible to deepen attention.

I—Investigate with Interest and Care: To investigate, call on your natural curiosity—the desire to know truth—and direct a more focused attention to your present experience. What most wants attention? What am I believing? What does this vulnerable place want from me? What does it most need?

N—Nurture with Self-Compassion: Offer some gesture of active care that might address this need. Does it need a message of reassurance? Of forgiveness? Of companionship? Of love? Experiment and see which most helps to comfort, soften or open your heart. It might be the mental whisper, I'm here with you. I'm sorry, and I love you. I love you, and I'm listening. It's not your fault. Trust in your goodness. If it feels difficult to offer yourself love, bring to mind a loving being—spiritual figure, family member, or friend - imagine that being's love and wisdom flowing into you.

Brach's process of practicing compassion is similar to the method suggested by Jesuit theologian Johann Baptist Metz. In his book *Poverty of Spirit*, Metz writes that the acknowledgment of one's humanness is a doorway through which a person must pass in order to become an authentic human being. He points to Jesus as the exemplar of this recognition. Jesus "professed and accepted our humanity... with all our broken dreams... with the meaning of existence slipping through our fingers" (19).

Brach names the need for a loving presence necessary for this recognition and investigation, while Metz uses the language of grace. Grace is needed to recognize and allow a space where the objective and loving investigation of one's motives, desires, and needs yields a loving, nurturing response.

For Metz, a poverty of spirit is required to position oneself in a posture of love towards self and others. "It is a necessary ingredient in any authentic Christian attitude toward life. Without it there can be no Christianity and no imitation of Christ" (25). He also emphasizes that encounter, with oneself and others, is necessary for this development. Poverty in spirit "operates through the radical depths of human encounter itself...If we commit ourselves to this person without reservations, if we accept (them) and do not try to use (them) as an instrument of self-assertion, our human encounter occurs within the horizon of unending mystery. This openness to others can be enjoyed only in the poverty of self-abandonment; egoism destroys it" (36).

The path of what Brach calls radical compassion and what Metz calls poverty of spirit provides a way for one to live a loving and just existence with oneself and all beings. When one is in right relationship with all, the dignity of all human people is recognized, one acts in solidarity with others, more attention is paid to the marginalized, and motives shift from being self-seeking to serving a greater good. What might all this look like on a granular level? Action toward a living wage, restorative justice rather than mass incarceration, less waste, new technology that repairs the environment, access to quality education, changes to the political landscape, and on and on. Success has been characterized by achieving desired aims. Obviously, a lot depends on what we desire and how we desire. The present time is an invitation to revisit our desires and the ways we expect them to be fulfilled. A paradigm shift is knocking on our door.

A long time ago, Mary Magdalene peered into a dark, empty tomb, and things looked pretty bleak. Today's college students face a similar scene—cancelled school programs, internships, and research opportunities, the possibility of remote learning for another year, separation from friends and loved ones, and a job market that continues to spiral downward. The future looks anything but promising. But Mary Magdalene's story didn't end with that sad, painful moment at the tomb—the story got better. A paradigm shift occurred that enabled Jesus' life and legacy to live on in ways greater than anyone could have envisioned.

There is a similar opportunity for students today—an opportunity to experience an updated version of success. But this experience requires practicing radical compassion with self and others. This practice enables the removal of fear and anxiety, the space for innovation and creativity, the development of authentic connections with others. And these qualities can then translate into loving, bold, and courageous actions that redefine a successful undergraduate and postgraduate career in astonishing ways. In his latest encyclical, Pope Francis emphasizes the need for new expectations and definitions of success, “Put simply, it is a matter of redefining our notion of progress” (Laudato Si, 194). COVID-19 has decimated people's lives—the pandemic is a sad, gut wrenching time for the world. And, in the face of such loss, we can find space to respond in ways that will change the world.

Resources:

Atlantic - I Have Seen the Future - And It's Not The Life We Knew (May 1, 2020) Brach, Tara, RAIN Resources (Accessed on April 29, 2020)

Forbes - Here's Why Experts Expect A Second Coronavirus Wave (May 9, 2020)

Mescher, Marcus, *The Ethics of Encounter*, (Orbis Books, 2020)

Metz, Johann Baptist, *Poverty of Spirit*, (Paulist Press, 1998)

Thich Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change* (Parallax Press, 1993)

Pope Francis, *Laudato Si* Vatican, May 24, 2015 (Accessed on April 29, 2020)

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching, Challenges and Directions* (Accessed on April 29, 2020)

THE REVOLUTION WILL NOT BE QUARANTINED: REFLECTING ON COVID-19 AND THE SEPARATION OF OUR BELIEFS AND ACTIONS

Separation and estrangement at the border

We will be hard pressed—in even 10 or 20 years—to discover a more egregious violation of God’s justice and a disregard for the Catholic Social Tradition than the tragedy of family separation at the southern U.S. border. With its blatant lack of concern for the poor and vulnerable and deviant lack of honor for inherent human dignity, the United States’ policy of ripping children away from their parents is a travesty on par with some of the world’s gravest sins. One could even imagine a scenario where the hearts and minds of everyday Americans might be stirred to the point of taking up arms to prevent such injustice—if it were being perpetrated somewhere else, by someone else.

One of the many reasons these policies and practices are so inhumane is the way in which separation—in its essence—creates estrangement. We may want to believe the cliché that “absence makes the heart grow fonder,” but that idea is only true in the rarest and most naively romantic of instances. In most cases, absence just makes the heart forget. Perhaps that is what makes us cling so tightly to the notion that, instead of estrangement, separation can create a deeper kind of connection than actual connection. This is false and should be resisted; particularly because we have collectively, as Americans, placed so many children in a position of growing estranged from their familial life lines. Instead of preserving the sanctity of the family, we are creating strangers. The longer the separation the deeper the estrangement and subsequent trauma, something known to all who have felt the pain of a loved one becoming estranged from us. The danger of this was presciently, and tragically, envisioned by U.S. and Mexican Bishops in their 2003 letter “Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope” in which they note that “we witness the vulnerability of our people involved in all sides of the migration phenomenon, including families devastated by the loss of loved ones who have undertaken the migration journey and children left alone when parents are removed from them.”⁴⁰ Those of us who are advocates for the Catholic Social Tradition, justice, and the gospel of Jesus Christ ought to weep over such realities and stand against them in any way possible.

⁴⁰ “Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope” USCCB, January 22, 2003. <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/immigration/strangers-no-longer-together-on-the-journey-of-hope.cfm> (4).

Quarantine and our own estrangements

The depth of the pain of separation is seen today in this season of global quarantine brought on by the spread of COVID-19. The stories of people dying alone, their families barred from seeing them, and the almost forced isolation of patients from their familial connections conjures images of the same kind of pain experienced by families at the border. Though it is done with much less malice, we are seeing the way separation rips apart the natural ties we experience as humans, the kind of ties we might refer to as kinship.

The character of kinship called for by the Catholic Social Tradition cannot be fully experienced in seasons of separation, because kinship stands opposed to the estrangement created by separation. So what does CST call for from us when we are experiencing a collective separation; an isolation outside of our control? This season has real world effects for the Common Good and—as we have seen borne out in news stories—impacts communities of the poor and vulnerable to a much greater degree than others. How ought we think about a framework that helps us orient our gospel practice around the tangible love of neighbor in a time when we cannot safely interact with our neighbors? Moreover, are there reasons to think that as we experience this season of separation we might, at the end, emerge from our houses wondering aloud—along with the main character of one of Jesus’ most famous parables—Who even is my neighbor?

All of these questions have caused me to wonder not “how do I apply the principles of CST to the particularity of the COVID-19 crisis?,” but rather “What does the COVID-19 crisis reveal in our way of life that might invite us to reflect, perhaps repent, and certainly re-orient as we move toward—eventually—a day when this season of separation ends?”

Strangers in a digital world

I find myself reflecting on whether or not the tangible separation and isolation we are experiencing now is merely a physical expression of a reality which has gained momentum over the last decades. The rapid expansion of a digital world, while promising to connect us to one another in a deeper way, has also opened up a wide world of superficial possibilities for connection and engagement. At the risk of sounding like a luddite,⁴¹ our global belief in the a-virtuous nature of digital existence—manifested most significantly in our devotion to social media—acts to connect us virtually to any place/person we want, while damaging the character of authentic human connection in the process. I can sit on my couch and “travel” to any destination I please. I can visit friends anywhere in the world without leaving the comfort of my home. I can advocate and ally for any issue facing the world by applying the appropriate hashtag.

For all the potential benefits of a digital world—we are sending our kids to school online, globally, right now after all—we have also given ourselves over to a reality where we can

⁴¹ I resonate with Sherry Turkle’s vantage on the dangers of a virtual existence, well encapsulated in the title and content of this interview from The Guardian “I’m not Anti-Technology, I’m Pro-Conversation.” <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2015/oct/18/sherry-turkle-not-anti-technology-pro-conversation>

do anything we want without doing anything at all. While this is not always the case, for example, though social media has also given a place for historically silenced voices to illuminate our collective blind spots, it can all too easily become yet one more way we create divides between our minds and our embodied lives. This is particularly true of faith. One could claim the digital world creates an impulse in us which resists embodying the things we say we believe. Of course, the Scriptures note this temptation long before the creation of cyberspace, so perhaps we should say the digital world reinforces, or gives permission for a new expression of disembodied faith practice. In today's landscape, it is easier to post Scripture passages without reflecting upon them, or articles about the injustice of poverty without engaging in relationship with "the poor." I can ally with this or that cause, demonstrating a belief in human dignity, without learning to live in genuine solidarity with those who are pushed to the margins of society. In other words, I can "live" online in a way that announces my commitment to, in the spirit of the prophet Isaiah, spending myself on behalf of the poor without that commitment costing me anything in the life I actually live in the flesh.⁴²

Our digital world breeds a different kind of separation, perhaps, but this separation still creates estrangement. It nurtures a stranger-ing both within ourselves, and between ourselves and others. Our digital existence can estrange us from ourselves because it allows for an easier separation between our beliefs and our actions and it can foster a unique kind of duplicity, one where we are able to curate an image of ourselves separate from the reality of our day to day life.⁴³ For example, if one were to peruse my social media feeds, it would be easy to presume that I am more engaged in the work of justice than is probably the case day to day. Seemingly, our digital selves resist insufficiency and shortcoming, and as such, resist our fullest humanity. This is but one reason why our online existence resists genuine encounter with others; at least the kind of encounter we are invited to experience by the Catholic Social Tradition. Online, it is our curated selves interfacing with other curated selves; a superficial posturing disguised as authentic human connection.⁴⁴ When we entrust human connection to this digital world, we find ourselves actively estranged from others. This is not an estrangement happening to us, outside of our control—like at the border, or during a quarantine—it is an estrangement we are increasingly becoming active participants in ourselves.

CST resists separation and invites us to do the same

Unwittingly, we become agents of our disconnection from ourselves and others. For all our talk about embodying our beliefs and commitments, we live in a world that is actively

⁴² In "Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted," Malcolm Gladwell notes that this is the basic logic of digital advocacy campaigns. Questioning the relative success of a recent online 'movement' he asked and answered; "How did the campaign get so many people to sign up? By not asking too much of them." <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/04/small-change-malcolm-gladwell>

⁴³ Turkle's interview refers to this as a "press release version of ourselves."

⁴⁴ "The platforms of social media are built around weak ties." Gladwell. "Small Change."

nurturing disembodied belief and conviction. The Catholic Social Tradition calls us to actively resist the separation of our beliefs from our actions and the relational estrangement to which it gives rise. As Pope Francis suggests, COVID-19 might help us remember the essential connection of the human family, and the subsequent responsibilities those of us who seek to embody the gospel truly have during, and after, times like these. “The present pandemic, however, reminds us that there are no differences or borders between those who suffer. We are all frail, all equal, all precious. May we be profoundly shaken by what is happening all around us: the time has come to eliminate inequalities, to heal the injustice that is undermining the health of the entire human family!”⁴⁵ The challenging times we find ourselves in will undoubtedly reveal our true level of concern for the poor and vulnerable and will test our commitment to the Common Good. To believe in these with our minds, but allow our lives to become, or remain, separate from others is to fall prey to the very dangers we are discussing.

To that end, this season of mandated separation might cause us to ask; *in what ways have we been—even unintentionally—social distancing ourselves from our neighbors all along?* Will our collective desire to return to ‘normal’ continue to give us unexamined permission to foster a separation of mind and body that estranges us from others, particularly those with whom relationship will cost us something? We cannot allow that to happen, because the work of seeking justice requires an expression of genuine encounter very opposed to the relational distance that can grow between ourselves and those on the margins. This seems to be what the Bishops are suggesting in *Justice in the World* when they assert that learning the work of justice “comes through action, participation and vital contact with the reality of injustice.”⁴⁶ In other words, justice isn’t worked out at a social distance.

Hopefully, though, this season of pause is creating space and opportunity for us to examine our normative social practices and to reflect upon the separations we see at work in our everyday realities. We have an opportunity to reorient our practice so when this particular separation ends we might re-engage our community better prepared to embody the Gospel highlighted by the Catholic Social Tradition as we pursue justice in the world. This seems important because we cannot fully love our neighbors from our couches. Certainly, the practice of social distancing has positive effects for our communities, but the revolution of love called for by Jesus and reflected in the Catholic Social Tradition cannot be fully and faithfully embodied in quarantine. The pursuit of justice outlined in CST must be worked out in real time, in actual communities. The liturgical calendar even provides us the regular reminder that the ultimate expressions of *Gospel* are flesh and blood realities. Returning to Jesus’ story of the Good Samaritan in the Gospel of Luke, I am reminded that if we have to ask “*Who even is my neighbor?*” we are standing in the place of the one Jesus reminds that loving neighbors means encountering the stranger in their

⁴⁵ http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200419_omelia-divinamisericordia.html

⁴⁶ *Justice in the World* (53).

pain with a willingness to engage in costly sacrifice to see them made whole. This is how the stranger becomes a friend. It seems we can resist estrangement, in part, by recognizing and responding to the essential connection between justice and discipleship. CST invites us to become particular kinds of people, developing our capacity for living a particular kind of life, one marked by the ethics of God's justice.

These are the stirrings that come to me as I sit on my couch and reflect on justice issues like the crisis at the border and what the gospel asks of me going forward. I wonder about the extent to which I embody my own commitment to the gospel and justice when I read the words of the Bishops in "Strangers No More" when they say, reflecting on the words of Pope Pius XII, "that all peoples have the right to conditions worthy of human life and, if these conditions are not present, the right to migrate. "Then . . . the right of the family to a [life worthy of human dignity] is recognized."⁴⁷ Considering the experience of migrants today, surely we are witnessing a desecration of these ideas. But, what does participation in the pursuit of justice look like for me in this case? Navigating these days with plenty of time to sit and reflect on my life, I sense the ethics of CST inviting me to resist the cheap price of my couch cushioned activism and to consider ways of participation that are, concretely, costly. I suspect part of the answer lies in my personal responsibility to my neighbor, particularly my neighbors who bear up under the struggle of our modern-day migration realities. This is the neighbor I am called to love, but if I continue to feel at ease with a separation between my belief and my action, this is the very neighbor from which I will remain estranged.

In any revolution, there might be seasons where—for any number of reasons—the times require it to go underground. But no revolutionary would confuse the underground for the actual work. The underground tests, refines, recruits, and equips, knowing that one day the time will come when the revolution will take to the streets. Maybe that is what this time of separation calls from us. Perhaps we resist the estrangement of our beliefs and actions by considering this season one for testing, refinement, recruiting, and equipping so that when we step outside our doors we engage the world with an embodied ethic able to more fully and faithfully love our neighbor, pursue justice, and live the gospel. When what is underground moves to the streets again, we might begin enacting Pope Francis' vision for our world post-COVID-19 crisis that he calls a "rising up again" marked by "being and accompanying."⁴⁸ In other words, no separation, because the revolution will not be quarantined.

⁴⁷ "Strangers No More." (29).

⁴⁸ https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2020/04/17/pope-francis-shares-his-vision-covid-19-aftermath?utm_source=piano&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=2931&pnespid=hvhn_ftXBxSNz.rbFSetj5tDp2N5auXu7V4CYLcU

LOOK THEM IN THE EYE: MORAL LEADERSHIP, THE COMMON GOOD, AND THE LIFE-SAVING EFFORTS OF THE TYRANNICAL STATE

Follow the leader

The image was shocking. Everyone had been told prior to entering the intensive care unit that it was critical to adhere to the highest standards of safety, including but not limited to wearing a protective covering over one's nose and mouth. Minnesotans offering plasma to help in the recovery of the century's most horrific illness eyed the mask-less vice president as he walked into the room. The press, masked and social distancing themselves, took the picture and sent it out for the world to see.⁴⁹

Sixty days into the COVID-19 pandemic the mask has become a symbol for many. For healthcare workers and patients, the mask represents life or death—a reminder that day in and day out, without the proper equipment to protect medical workers and patients the toll of the virus will only be maximized and sickness and death will continue.

For many the mask symbolizes solidarity, commitment to the public good, and the act of participation; others however, see the mask as a form of oppression or a symbol of tyranny. In this framework the government has taken on the role of the tyrannical state that is seeking to restrict ways of life, to tell people what they can and cannot do with their bodies, and infringing on the personal rights of Americans. For some, the life-saving efforts of the state are seen as an attempt to restrict the option to fall ill and possibly perish. A woman at a protest in Richmond Virginia noted this frustration clearly on her protest sign, "Give me liberty or give me death."⁵⁰

When asked why he chose not to wear a mask, Mike Pence offered the following to reporters, "As vice president of the United States, I'm tested for the coronavirus on a regular basis, and everyone who is around me is tested for the coronavirus. And since I don't have the coronavirus, I thought it'd be a good opportunity for me to be here, to be able to speak to these researchers, these incredible health care personnel, and look them in the eye and say 'thank you'."⁵¹

⁴⁹ Watson, Kathryn. "Pence forgoes a face mask at the Mayo Clinic, appearing to violate policy." CBS News, 29 April 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/mike-pence-face-mask-mayo-clinic-visit/>

⁵⁰ Edlund, Alexa Welch. "Photos: Reopen Virginia protest in Richmond." Richmond Times Dispatch, 22 April 2020, https://www.richmond.com/news/virginia/photos-reopen-virginia-protest-in-richmond/collection_9ea5ac31-204e-531b-9240-b23e7d8c617b.html#1

⁵¹ Watson, Ibid.

The critical and alarming nature of the mask-wearing moment was perhaps not as much about the mask itself as it was about ethical leadership. In this critical moment of crisis, when many are looking for moral and ethical leadership that considers the lives of all involved and offers reasonable guidance to move forward, the country watches for its leaders to model how to navigate such uncertain circumstances. What the vice president may have missed, unintentionally or otherwise, is that the mask itself symbolizes not only the simple protective covering for one's self or one's autonomy, but an ethical choice to care for others and promote the flourishing and thriving of a healthy common society.

Moral leadership

When the vice president of the United States chose not to wear a mask into the Mayo Clinic during a pandemic when he was asked to, it modeled to the rest of the country that they too do not need to wear a mask, that to wear a mask was a simple, unweighted, and unnecessary choice. Here the lack of ethical decision making is evident and is replaced with dangerous behavior that models resistance to the life-saving efforts of the state, in which a social contract exists between it and its citizens. Instead of promoting a common or public good, this act of resistance elevates a false importance of individual rights over the wellbeing of others, especially the most vulnerable in society.

Therewithin stands the misunderstanding of the mask. The mask has never been about the allowance for one to remain healthy or sick; the mask has always been about the public good. To wear a mask in public, responding to our COVID-19 reality, is to live into an active citizenship that participates in the life-saving efforts to stop the spread of a hideous, invisible sickness on the behalf of others, not simply for one's own protection or gain.

In such times of crisis and uncertainty, society looks toward its leadership to understand what they should do to survive and how to move forward. Citizens act within the social contract, inclined to trust that the leadership will in fact, in times of national crisis, work for a common or public good; however, only leaders working through a framework of moral and ethical leadership will make these choices, choosing the flourishing of many over selfish gain or over the experience of the individual. Once the social contract has been broken, many in society will look elsewhere for true moral leadership in order to benefit from and actively participate in the work of the common good. Specifically, in this case, the work of the common good is the work of creating an environment in which as many lives as possible are spared from death by simply wearing a mask.

The process of becoming a moral leader necessitates the intentional choice to make consistent ethical leadership decisions—day in and day out—oftentimes at the expense of the leader for the gain of others. These leaders are often defined by the ethical choices they make and the moral framework their values are rooted in and supposes that, more often than not, these leaders will make intentional choices to pursue the work of the common good. The act of making consistent ethical leadership decisions does not negate the reality of competing common goods, but in turn maximizes the impact of the decision. Therefore, because the stakes are so high for the outcomes of these decisions when common goods come into competition, the moral leader must consider the common good when faced with equally substantive choices—her ethical framework demands it despite what she may personally or professionally lose.

In our COVID-19 reality, moral leadership is all around us, however this type of leadership does not always come from the people or places we expect it to or in the critical moments when it is needed. We must then ask ourselves,

Who are the true moral leaders of our time?

Who can society trust, believe in, and support during this chaos?

Who has the best interest of society in mind when its existence is threatened?

We do not need to look far, as moral leaders are all around us, making ethical decision after ethical decision on the frontlines every day in every community across the country. The public healthcare workers, the mask makers, those caring for the children or the hungry or the sick and dying—day in and day out—these are the individuals who are seeking to do work for the common good in selfless and even altruistic ways and are the leaders of our time.

Key to these men and women is the choice to actively participate in the life-saving efforts encouraged by the state that will someday allow the flourishing and thriving of life to happen once more, despite the impact of the broken social contract—*money before lives*,⁵² and despite what it will cost them—further isolation, wage loss, longer separation, disruption, and risk of illness to care for others. These are actions of solidarity and a commitment to a world that is not just theirs, but everyone’s. There is no better representation of active citizenship than this, which is perhaps why many in society are calling them heroes and thanking them for their service.

CST and the mask makers

Many wonderful articles have been written about the importance of the public good in relation to mask wearing. Recently, The Atlantic offered a wonderful article listing the many ways in which mask wearing for one’s self purely supports the thriving of others and because of its nature as a public good we should feel inclined to participate because we all benefit from this action, similar to the CST principle of rights and responsibilities.⁵³

Moving beyond the concept of the public good, when we engage the lens of Catholic social teaching, these actions reflect the lived-out principles of solidarity and commitment to the common good. The moral leaders around us are working towards goals that are aimed for a world that is beyond us, for a world as it should be and that includes all of us. Within this framework is the commitment to true solidarity, the deep understanding that while we cannot walk in each other’s shoes, we will walk together, even at six feet apart, even unto death,⁵⁴ and even unto Golgotha. By modeling these principles, moral leaders invite the rest of society to consider their role in knowing and caring for one’s neighbor and their relationship to all of society as a whole, not only when there is a pandemic, but beyond these difficult days and into the “new normal.”

⁵² “Opening Up America Again” - April 16 2020

⁵³ Tufekci, Howard, and Greenhalgh. “The Real Reason To Wear A Mask.” The Atlantic, 22 April, 2020 <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/04/dont-wear-mask-yourself/610336/>

⁵⁴ A nod to the thousands of medical workers who have held the hands of those approaching death or in the midst of dying so these individuals would not die alone.

In a recent article written by Catholic News Service writer Effie Caldarola, Caldarola uses the words of Pope Benedict from *Caritas in Veritate* to make her final point, noting that living the common good cannot only be “private Sunday religion” but a way of life. “The more we strive to secure a common good corresponding to the real needs of our neighbors,” she writes, “the more effectively we love them.”⁵⁵

Additionally, the call to actively participate in the life-saving efforts of the “tyrannical” state is what Pope Francis refers to as an expression of the rule of nature. “Rivers do not drink their own water; trees do not eat their own fruit; the sun does not shine on itself and flowers do not spread their fragrance for themselves. Living for others is a rule of nature. We are all born to help each other. No matter how difficult it is.”⁵⁶

The survival of our world depends on our active participation and commitment to live for lives other than our own. These ethical and active choices are modeled all around us, inviting us in, and we see it in creation itself, in the work of the mask makers and the frontline workers. We witness this active participation in the actions of everyday people making one ethical and moral decision after another—leading, serving, and moving things forward for others, whether that takes ten more days or 10,000 more days, and even when it hurts.

In times of crisis society needs brave, courageous, and moral leaders willing to make ethical decisions that promote the common good. Look all around you and you will see the moral leaders of our time, and when you do, look them in the eye and tell them “thank you”; I am sure you will have your mask on.

⁵⁵ Caldarola, Effie. “Consider the Common Good and Wear Your Mask.” Catholic News Service, 12 May 2020, <https://catholicphilly.com/2020/05/commentaries/consider-the-common-good-and-wear-your-mask/>

⁵⁶ Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI) Lacombe Canada, “It is the law of nature that creation does not live for itself, but for others.” OMI, 27 March 2020, <https://omilacombe.ca/law-nature-creation-not-live-creatures/>

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CUSTODIANS OF THE COMMUNITY’S HEALTH: THOUGHTS ON LABOR AND CST DURING THE PANDEMIC

In South Bend, Indiana, the sun is shining, the temperature all week has been a pleasant seventy degrees, and the local flora is flush with blooming flowers and the aromas of June. As I look out the window of my home office, the vibrant yet soothing hues of green and blue evoke the annual promise of early summer. But all is not normal, as the *New York Times*’ interactive coronavirus tracking map flickering on my computer screen reminds me. Across the globe, alarming splotches of orange and red indicate rising cases of COVID-19, more than matching the light blue splashes indicating falling rates. Closer to home, while Indiana as a state is seeing a modest decline in new cases and deaths, my own county, St. Joseph, is experiencing a slight uptick, and we are surrounded on three sides by counties marked bright orange as potential “hot spots” for an outbreak. We are, in short, still very much mired in a local and global pandemic unprecedented in the modern era.⁵⁷

And yet, despite the uncertainties provoked by a virus and disease we still know too little about, national and state leaders urge us to get “back to normal” as soon as possible. President Trump sets the tone from the top, demanding that we “reopen our economy” immediately, outsourcing all responsibility for the nation’s safety to the states, ignoring the risks of public health catastrophes, and pretending the pandemic is firmly in our past. At the state level, while Governor Eric Holcomb’s rhetoric is more subdued and respectful of science, his Back on Track Indiana plan largely follows the president’s lead, marching us in lockstep through reopening phases with predetermined dates to make sure we will be operating at “full capacity” by July 4 (Independence from Sanity Day?).⁵⁸

Look, I am fully aware of the profound and interconnected economic and social hardships produced by the state shutdowns in March and April, and I realize that we cannot maintain such lockdowns for an indeterminate future. But public health must remain our

⁵⁷ “Coronavirus Map: Tracking the Global Outbreak,” *New York Times*, updated regularly [accessed for this piece on Jun. 15, 2020]; “Indiana Coronavirus Map and Case Count,” *New York Times*, updated regularly [but accessed for this piece on Jun. 15, 2020].

⁵⁸ “After 6 Months, Important Mysteries About Coronavirus Endure,” *New York Times*, Jun. 1, 2020; Brian Bennett, “President Trump Is Trying to Get America Back to Normal. His First Big Trip Was Anything But,” *TIME*, May 6, 2020; The White House, “President Trump on reopening the economy,” YouTube, May 8, 2020; Gov. Eric Holcomb, “Back on Track Indiana: Governor Holcomb’s Roadmap to Safely Reopen Indiana,” *Back on Track Indiana* [accessed Jun. 15, 2020]; Gov. Eric Holcomb, “Where We Are Going: Stage 5,” *Back on Track Indiana* [accessed Jun. 15, 2020].

top priority, along with a recognition of the age, race, and class-based disparate impacts of both staying totally closed and reopening without adequate protections for our most vulnerable populations. Our first task, then, should be to reject the superficial reasoning pushing us to choose one of two false choices: either destruction of the economy and many people's livelihoods in the name of public health, on the one hand, or a rushed return to normalcy that sacrifices essential workers, and many more of us, to a highly contagious disease likely to bring about cascading spikes in deaths, on the other.⁵⁹

Instead of pitting “Lives Versus Livelihoods,” as one *New York Times* headline framed it, we should push for a reopening that promotes safe livelihoods *in order to* save lives.⁶⁰ The best way to accomplish that is by adopting policies that foreground workers' own experiences and expertise on the front lines of this fight for a safe and healthy economy and society. Though largely ignored by policymakers, pundits, and the public in our pandemic (not yet post-pandemic) planning, workers occupy critical positions where the virus most often spreads—from the grocery store or fast food checkout line to the factory assembly line—giving them unique insights into proper social distancing and making them the true custodians of any community's health. Tapping workers' knowledge and empowering them to act in the name of the common good would promote not only workplace safety, but also public health. Further, it just might help forge a pathway toward a more sustainable, inclusive economy.

What might such a worker-centered policy look like on the ground? First, frontline employees' voices should be integrated into the reopening and ongoing health and safety protocols of individual businesses to make sure that workers' distinct interests are front and center in employers' plans. To promote authentic and meaningful representation, workers should select delegates from their own ranks, and those delegates should enjoy paid release time from some of their regular duties. Second, workers should be encouraged to report workplace violations of public health guidelines directly to their delegates or local government officials, and they and their delegates should enjoy full protection from possible employer retaliation. Third, workplace safety delegates across a local jurisdiction should have official representation on government boards, committees, and task forces charged with protecting public health and promoting economic development.⁶¹

What I am describing here would be the realization of Catholic social tradition at the workplace. Catholic social tradition, or CST for short, has long emphasized labor as a

⁵⁹ Elise Gould and Valerie Wilson, “Black workers face two of the most lethal preexisting conditions for coronavirus—racism and economic inequality,” *Economic Policy Institute*, Jun. 1, 2020; Jon Allsop, “The false ‘debate’ over reopening America,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, Apr. 13, 2020.

⁶⁰ “Restarting the Economy Is About Lives Versus Livelihoods,” *New York Times*, Mar. 24, 2020, updated May 6, 2020.

⁶¹ For a related proposal emphasizing state-based worker-led health and safety councils, see Nelson Lichtenstein, “It's Workers Who Should Determine When Their Workplace Is Safe,” *The American Prospect*, Apr. 29, 2020.

core site for the expression of the inherent dignity of every human person. From Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 through Pope John Paul II's *Laborem Exercens* to Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'* in 2015, the Catholic Church has continuously wrestled with how to preserve and enact human dignity through work, especially in modern economies where most of us labor for someone else.⁶²

In essence, three core, interrelated CST principles have emerged in the Church's century-plus engagement with industrialization and its offshoots:

1. An assertion of the inherent dignity of both work itself—whatever its nature and wherever it's performed—and those who perform that work.
2. A demand for securing a voice for workers in the decisions that affect them—via labor unions or the equivalent at the workplace and democratic participation in government.
3. A call for promoting the common good in all social and economic relationships, including the employment relationship.⁶³

Pope Benedict effectively summarized these CST tenets in his 2009 encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, where he reasserted the Church's call for “decent work,” which he defined as:

work that expresses the essential dignity of every man and woman in the context of their particular society: work that is freely chosen, effectively associating workers, both men and women, with the development of their community; work that enables the worker to be respected and free from any form of discrimination; work that makes it possible for families to meet their needs and provide schooling for their children, without the children themselves being forced into labour; work that permits the workers to organize themselves freely, and to make their voices heard; work that leaves enough room for rediscovering one's roots at a personal, familial and spiritual level; work that guarantees those who have retired a decent standard of living.⁶⁴

“Decent work,” then, is that which affords a flourishing life fostering freedom, autonomy, and growth—not only for the worker but also the worker's family. The challenge is for policymakers, employers, and all stakeholders to promote an economy where markets work for humans, rather than the other way around—to “humaniz[e] socio-economic systems,” as Pope Francis has put it.⁶⁵

⁶² Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum* [*Encyclical on Capital and Labor*] (1891); Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens* [*Encyclical on Human Work*] (1981); Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* [*Encyclical on Care for our Common Home*] (2015). For a reference list of resources, see “CST on The Labor Question,” *Higgins Labor Program at the Center for Social Concerns at the University of Notre Dame* [accessed Jun. 15, 2020].

⁶³ The US Conference of Catholic Bishops website provides a clearinghouse for links to CST and work: see in particular the Primers on “Labor -- Employment,” *USCCB* [accessed Jun. 15, 2020].

⁶⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* [*Encyclical on Integral Human Development in Charity and Truth*] (2009), 63.

⁶⁵ Devin Watkins, “Pope urges global finance leaders to reduce economic inequality,” *Vatican News*, Feb. 5, 2020.

Even before the coronavirus upended our lives and sent the global economy reeling, the vast majority of the world's workers were not experiencing anything near CST's vision of decent work. In the USA, wages have been flat for nearly five decades, and they had barely budged in spite of the historically low unemployment rates our country was enjoying in early 2020. Over the same half-century, a time of significant economic growth, the erosion of the employment contract has left increasing percentages of workers with shrinking benefits, fewer job protections, and paltry pensions.⁶⁶ As the Pope lectured a group of global financial elites on the eve of the global pandemic, "The world is rich, and yet the number of poor people is swelling all around us."⁶⁷

This chronic crisis of widening economic inequality and stalled progress for millions of working people fueled the creation of the University of Notre Dame's Just Wage Initiative, an interdisciplinary working group of scholars and students probing the foundational question: What makes any given wage just or unjust? Informed and inspired by CST's commitment to promoting decent work and workers' dignity, the Just Wage Framework and Online Tool formally launched just as the pandemic was breaking in the USA. The Just Wage Tool offers stakeholders across the spectrum—from employers, individual workers, and unionists to professors, parishes, and policymakers—an opportunity to engage core economic critical questions about the relationships between rights, responsibilities, and roles at the workplace. And now, mired as we are in the midst of a horrible pandemic threatening to exacerbate the inequalities already embedded within our existing economy, the time to ponder the Just Wage Question couldn't be more urgent.⁶⁸

At the outset of the pandemic in the USA, in March and April 2020, there was a brief moment when pundits and policymakers alike suddenly discovered the importance of workers whose labor is greatly undervalued and generally ignored. As media outlets flooded our screens with stories of the sacrifices of low-paid retail clerks, delivery drivers, and cleaning crews now deemed "essential workers," Congress passed a flurry of laws to temporarily protect working people, from encouraging employers to maintain payrolls

⁶⁶ Drew DeSilver, "For most U.S. workers, real wages have barely budged in decades," *Pew Research Center*, Aug. 7, 2018; Elise Gould, "State of Working America: Wages 2019," *Economic Policy Institute*, Feb. 20, 2020; David Weil, *The Fissured Workplace: How Work Became So Bad for So Many and What Can be Done to Improve It* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

⁶⁷ Watkins, "Pope urges global finance leaders to reduce economic inequality."

⁶⁸ The Just Wage Initiative is sponsored by the Higgins Labor Program of the Center for Social Concerns at the University of Notre Dame. The Just Wage Framework and Tool, an evolving online resource for all stakeholders, is available at socialconcerns.nd.edu/justwagetool. For a list of workshops, seminars, and symposiums sponsored by the Just Wage Initiative since 2017, as well as invited presentations and conference papers delivered by Just Wage Working Group members over the same period, visit <https://socialconcerns.nd.edu/just-wage-presentations#>. Note that some feature video or transcripts of remarks. For a short description of the Just Wage Initiative for a lay audience, see Dan Graff, "Promoting a Just Wage Economy," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History* 16, no. 3 (2019): 9-10.

to increasing unemployment compensation while expanding its scope and extending its coverage.⁶⁹ Though only weeks have passed since then, it feels like ancient history as we foolheartedly face the future, asking workers once again to sacrifice everything.

In our collective rush to reopen the economy and resume some semblance of normalcy, we risk forgetting the dignity inherent in work, and we risk a resumption of decades of devaluing those who perform that work. Empowering workers to help articulate and enforce community workplace safety and public health directives might seem a rather quotidian site from which to imagine the restructuring of the American economy via the revaluing of its workforce, but we must start somewhere. In a national economy defined by global-oriented corporations, weakened unions, and government gridlock, the local might be the most likely place to begin. It's in our most ordinary relationships and activities, after all, where we exhibit human dignity and enact the common good on a daily basis.

⁶⁹ “Articles on Essential workers,” *The Conversation* [accessed Jun. 15, 2020]; “The CARES Act Works for All Americans,” US Department of Treasury [accessed Jun. 15, 2020]; “Unemployment Insurance Relief During COVID-19 Outbreak,” US Department of Labor [accessed Jun. 15, 2020].

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THE COMMON GOOD IN CRISIS? THREE QUESTIONS

A key principle of Catholic Social Tradition is the principle of the common good. Even though it has been suggested that we should see the concept of the common good as a heuristic device (Riordan 2011), there are robust definitions in normative texts. *Gaudium et Spes* 26 prominently defines the common good as “the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment.” The same document calls for “a dynamic concept of that good” (*Gaudium et Spes* 74) making the point that “concrete demands of this common good are constantly changing as time goes on” (*Gaudium et Spes* 78).

The concept of the common good is usually connected to the idea of a stable social order. Catholic Social Teaching is committed to “the maintenance of a certain and definite order” (*Quadragesimo Anno* 45). This order directs relationships between persons, institutions, and values. The common good “is not simply the sum total of particular interests; rather it involves an assessment and integration of those interests on the basis of a balanced hierarchy of values; ultimately, it demands a correct understanding of the dignity and the rights of the person” (*Centesimus Annus* 47).

The picture of the common good that is presented in the main documents is the idea of social harmony based on cooperation (cf. *Quadragesimo Anno* 84, 85, *Mater et Magistra* 56, 65), the idea of a moral order (*Pacem in Terris* 85). The main point of governments and states is to serve the common good (*Rerum Novarum* 32; *Quadragesimo Anno* 109, *Mater et Magistra* 20, 37). In very strong language: “The attainment of the common good is the sole reason for the existence of civil authorities” (*Pacem in Terris* 54). In fact, one document understands “politics” as: “prudent concern for the common good” (*Laborem Exercens* 20).

Common Good and crisis ethics

Does the notion of the common good change in times of a crisis?

The fields of “emergency ethics” and “disaster ethics” have been developed especially with regard to wars and natural disasters. Sorell defined an emergency as “a situation, often unforeseen, in which there is a risk of great harm or loss and a need to act immediately or decisively if the loss or harm is to be averted or minimized” (Sorell 2003, p. 22). Walzer developed the term “supreme emergency,” which he characterizes by two conditions: the nature of the looming danger and its imminence. Both conditions are necessary: the danger must be imminent, and, in addition, “of an unusual and horrifying kind” (Walzer 2000, p. 253; cf. Fleming 2016). In another text, Walzer points out that a supreme emergency exists “when our deepest values and our collective survival are in imminent

danger” (Walzer 2004, p. 33). If the deepest values are threatened, the very institution of morality could be threatened (Toner 2005, p. 559). If the very institution of morality is threatened, there is the risk of what Sorell had called “a moral black hole” (Sorell 2003), a situation where no moral expectations can reasonably be made, where the predictability of moral behavior has practically been eroded. These approaches give us the elements of “(imminent) risk of great harm,” “urgency,” and “threat to fundamental values.” These three elements constitute a different context for the justification of moral claims and decisions which may include the idea that an emergency (or “a supreme emergency”) would justify measures that would not be acceptable under normal circumstances.

Can we say that the understanding of the common good changes because of and within a crisis?

Emergency ethics asks questions like: during an emergency, is it acceptable to lose some people to save many? Which are the trade-offs that can be justified to achieve important moral goals? Who carries the burden of proof for justifying extraordinary measures? (cf., Sorell 2003, p. 32).

On April 10, 2020, The New York Times offered an interesting debate entitled: “Restarting America Means People Will Die. So When Do We Do It?”—the debate reflects an example of “emergency ethics.” Which sacrifices are called for or at least compatible with the principle of the common good?

A crisis can be considered a moral test establishing the robustness and resilience of moral standards even under adverse conditions. Emergency situations can undeniably be “occasions for the serious rupture of moral conventions” (Sorell 2003, p. 31).

This is a first question to ask in times of a pandemic: Does the notion of the common good change in times of a crisis? And more precisely: how can the common good be upheld within the framework of a crisis ethics dealing with the risk of great harm, urgency, and the threat to fundamental values?

Common Good and the pandemic

It should not surprise anyone that the common good receives heightened attention during the pandemic—there is pressure on state support and on both national and international solidarity. The common good is a plausible lens through which to approach ethical aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, stated on March 6 in Geneva: “As a medical doctor, I understand the need for a range of steps to combat COVID-19, and as a former head of government, I understand the often difficult balancing act when hard decisions need to be taken. However our efforts to combat this virus won’t work unless we approach it holistically, which means taking great care to protect the most vulnerable and neglected people in society, both medically and economically.” This is a statement that expresses the idea of the common good that refers to the community as a whole. Another link between the pandemic and the common good has been established in a short note by Sridhar Venkatapuram; he has argued that public health ethics is not primarily about the conflict between the interests of the few versus the greater good. It is about how we organize our society and how we relate to one another (Venkatapuram 2020).

There are specific challenges to political ethics in times of a pandemic, especially in negotiating the status of communities and their relationship to individuals: there are concerns with individual rights and freedoms (including the protection of privacy and the use of digital data), with “laws of fear” (which have been discussed in post-9/11 legislation - Sunstein 2005). It has been argued that institutional disinformation and concealment of information have particularly eroded trust in international and government words and actions among the general public. The Siracusa Principles, adopted by the UN Economic and Social Council in 1984 provide guidance on the justifiability of government responses that restrict human rights for reasons of public health or national emergency. In 2001, the UN Human Rights Committee issued General Comment No. 29: “Article 4: Derogations during a State of Emergency.” These documents declare with authority that any measures taken to protect the population that limit people’s rights and freedoms must be lawful, necessary, and proportionate. UN human rights experts issued a statement in Geneva on March 16, 2020, warning that, given the COVID-19 pandemic, states should not abuse emergency measures to suppress human rights. There are concerns with the specific vulnerabilities of the most disadvantaged populations (the homeless, the elderly, people suffering from chronic diseases et al) and with the widening of existing gaps like the gender gap (Wenham et al 2020), but also the gap between richer and poorer countries.

The common good is an important category to understand normative aspects of the political dynamics of the pandemic.

Country responses reflecting the common good

Which government responses are most appropriate given a commitment to the common good? Different countries have responded differently to the pandemic – let me mention four European examples:

Austria acted early relative to the coronavirus outbreaks and saw its infection rates come under control. Data compiled by Oxford University’s Blavatnik School of Government shows that Austria introduced lockdowns “when they had fewer than 1,000 cases and almost no deaths. When France and Spain began theirs, their case count was closer to 10,000 and their death tolls in the hundreds” (Laurent 2020). There have, however, been concerns with the compatibility of constitutional rights and the pandemic legislation in Austria with appeals made to the Constitutional Court. Hungary has decided to take an utterly restrictive approach with the granting of emergency powers that enable the government to rule by decree without a foreseen termination date; it has become clear that the pandemic is a stress test for democracies with the potential to feed into a new authoritarianism (Bieber 2020). Sweden, based on the expertise of Anders Tegnell and endorsed by Prime Minister Stefan Lofven, has been at the other end of the spectrum, following a liberal approach and appealing to the prudence and voluntary restrictions of the citizens. Sweden has left its schools, gyms, cafes, bars and restaurants open throughout the spread of the pandemic—the government has urged citizens to act responsibly and follow social distancing guidelines. The United Kingdom has shown an inconsistent approach—as David Hunter wrote: “For many weeks, the British instinct to ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’ was the public face of the U.K. government’s response to COVID-19 . . . On Thursday, March 12, when Prime Minister Boris Johnson held his first major

press conference on the issue, flanked by his chief medical advisor and his chief science advisor, there was no recommendation, far less any instruction, to shut down one of the busier weekends on the sporting calendar” (Hunter 2020). With the Prime Minister being infected himself, there were some changes in the public perception and the government response of announcing the closing of schools was significantly later than other European countries.

These particular four countries represent four different types of welfare states. According to Esping-Andersen’s influential distinction between liberal regimes (example: UK, encouraging market solutions to social problems), conservative regimes (example: Austria, shaped by traditional family values), and social democratic regimes (example: Sweden, promoting an equality of high standards combined with a heavy social burden) there are distinct ways of conceptualizing “welfare” and “well-functioning societies” (Esping-Andersen 1990). It seems plausible to compare three different countries that represent, at least historically, three different types of welfare state. Hungary, as an Eastern European post-communist country, falls in a category of its own. This would give us four categories of welfare state conceptions to work with, assuming that the design of a welfare state reflects explicit and implicit assumptions about the common good, flourishing communities, and well-functioning societies. This is to say that government responses to COVID-19 can be read against the background of the tradition of understanding well-functioning societies and the common good. Government responses reflect implicit notions of the common good.

This brings me to my second question: which government responses are most appropriate given a robust understanding of the common good?

Pope Francis

In his words on the occasion of the “extraordinary moment of prayer” on Friday, March 27, Pope Francis made important points about the common good and the crisis we are in. He described the crisis as a teaching moment: it reveals the fact that we are in the same boat, it reveals “our vulnerability and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities”; the Pope identified “greed” and “haste” as two major factors to characterize the current situation. Pope Francis also commented on the proper ways of dealing with the crisis; he made it clear that everyone matters and has to contribute, using the boat metaphor again, “all of us called to row together, each of us in need of comforting the other,” overcoming selfishness is a major aspect of responding to the crisis: “we cannot go on thinking of ourselves, but only together can we do this.” The crisis is not only a moment of truth, but also a moment of judgment: “a time to choose what matters and what passes away, a time to separate what is necessary from what is not.”

Additionally, Pope Francis reflected on one future implication of the crisis for the common good. In a letter to members of popular movements and organizations, written on Easter Sunday, he suggested we should use the crisis as a time for major social change: “This may be the time to consider a universal basic wage which would acknowledge and dignify the noble, essential tasks you carry out.” He urged the addressees to reflect on “life after the

pandemic,” inviting them to “think about the project of integral human development that we long for and that is based on the central role and initiative of the people in all their diversity, as well as on universal access to those three Ts that you defend: Trabajo (work), Techo (housing), and Tierra (land and food).”

These are powerful reflections, deeply relevant for the understanding of the common good in a crisis. This brings me to a third question: what can we learn from Pope Francis’ teachings during and on the pandemic about “the common good in crisis?”

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