A Theologian’s Memoir in Time of Pandemic

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Abstract
As a theology professor in a Catholic University, we are trained to teach minds, touch hearts, and transform lives. But a professor gains deeper understanding of the importance of teaching theology in time of COVID-19 pandemic. My theology is rooted in my personal religious and spiritual experiences. Therefore, experience led me to construct three themes: “Light of Faith”; “The True, Good and Beautiful”; “Religious and Spiritual Experiences.”

Keywords
Theology, faith, COVID-19, spirituality, praxis

“Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth” (John Paul II, 1998). All Catholic universities strive to develop a curriculum that is congruent with and enriched by faith and reason. This requires theologians to think about how their individual course objectives and content can be enriched by the teachings of the Church and their personal religious and spiritual experiences. As a theology professor in a Catholic University in the Philippines, we are trained to teach minds, touch hearts, and transform lives. For the past three years since the pandemic started, I have been teaching college students using the newly implemented or the ‘online distance learning or ‘hybrid’ class. The COVID-19 pandemic is a public health crisis of unimaginable proportions. Bard (2022) opines that there are blessings of “Breadth and Variety” in time of pandemic. COVID-19 restrictions have forced places of worship to stop or limit services, with many moving to online worship. Weddings and funerals have been curtailed. Religious festivals and observances have not been spared either. Many faith groups have turned to digital technologies to allow them to connect with their communities and pray together (Corpuz, 2021). As COVID-19 has swept across our world, higher educational institutions have engaged in theological reflection and conversation about faithfully responding to this global challenge and social unrest. From the death of George Floyd to the recent war between Ukraine and Russia, how can we make any sense of all these events?

First, we need to respond to the signs of the times. As people of faith, we are challenged to respond and to look at these things in the light of faith. Responding to the signs of the times gives us a meaningful perspective. Pope Francis opines that “faith allows us to interpret the meaning and the mysterious beauty of what is unfolding” (Francis, 2015). The Pope reminds us that at times of great difficulty, that is exactly the time when our faith resources are being called to active service. Indeed, theology is not just about learning the doctrines, dogmas, and creeds. Theology needs to be applied in our daily praxis. As a professor, I gain a deeper understanding of the importance of faith when I experienced the quarantine. It was a time of deepening one’s faith.

Second, we need to go back to the True, Good and Beautiful. Theology provides us with tools and instruments for unravelling the truth and meaning by spiritual insight and intelligence. What is remarkable about this imagery is the capacity to “know” what is in the process of revelation and its quality of beauty. In other words, an appreciation of what is yet to be revealed. Theology provides one with the power to transcend the present material conditions, and to perceive the True, the Good and the Beautiful in time of violent populism and fake news. Faith then, lies in the assurance that out of a situation of crisis, there is hope for a new life and a new beginning. That is faith.

Third, responding from our religious and spiritual experiences. My theology is rooted in my personal religious and
spiritual experiences. Just like faith, theology is a personal journey. Living in a predominant Christian country in Asia — the Philippines, where almost 90% are Christians, I fully embraced the Catholic religion. Yet, I am also aware that theology is not static but dynamic. There are times when I question my faith. There are also times when my students lose hope and have a difficult time finding meaning and purpose in what is happening to them because of mental health concerns. For a religious person, that often takes the form of losing faith in a loving and merciful God after witnessing a tragic event. But even those who profess “Spiritual But Not Religious” (SBNR), those who do not pray to a higher power usually have some belief in how the world works that gives them a sense of safety and security. Serious illness and tragic events can challenge these anchors and throw a person into turmoil. Indeed, faith is not just knowing, but faith is also trusting. In the face of death and suffering, faith gives us the assurance that there is hope.

During a major crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, we need to make sure that everyone is getting spiritual care. The COVID-19 experience led us to see these things in the Light of Faith. The COVID-19 pandemic invites us to find the True, Good and Beautiful in every situation. The pandemic invites us to look inwardly through our personal Religious and Spiritual Experiences. We are all in the same boat with a lockdown and COVID-19. We are all part of one human race, and we should learn from one another’s faith and belief, and celebrate the diversity.

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