

# *Missionary Challenges and Opportunities in Time of Pandemic*

Introduction to the Community Project of Life  
of the Xaverian International Theologate in The Philippines, 2020-21

## Introduction

We are experiencing a very particular time: **The Centenary Jubilee** of the publication of the Testament Letter and the approval of the first Constitutions. As a Xaverian family we are called to reflect upon the spiritual legacy we have received through the Testament Letter. Furthermore, the approval of the Xaverian Constitutions one hundred years ago signifies the official recognition by the Church of the *ad Gentes* charism of St. Guido as a gift of the Spirit to the whole Church and the world. Ever since, (as Xaverian missionaries) we have become reminders to the people of God of our common duty to love non-Christians, striving to make Jesus known and welcomed by them. This is timely, as the Church will dedicate the next year to Mission *ad Gentes*, in the context of the celebrations of the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the evangelization of the Philippines.

In the last few months, we have been experiencing **an unprecedented existential change** caused by the COVID-19 Virus. We have been compelled to stay at home with some exceptions limited to the provision of essential needs; meeting people has been discouraged since that would expose oneself to possible contagion and it could place a threat to someone else's health. Our community has already undergone a long time of isolation; some of us have even endured individual confinement to a room (one of us three times already). Moreover, five of our confreres were found positive to the virus, fortunately in asymptomatic way.

Before starting our Community Project of Life, let us reflect upon some **challenges and opportunities** that this particular time has brought. We are called to not just endure and survive, but to transform this time into a meaningful experience in which we can get closer to God and our brothers and sisters (although not in person). It must also be the time for living our mission, despite the apparent impossibility of doing so.

I would like to begin this reflection with some simple considerations meant to connect our vocation to this special time we are living in. The world is moving making the dream of Saint Guido come true (a dream borrowed from Jesus himself) namely to make the **world a single family**. Last March I was struck by these words of the pope: "We are all in the same boat" and "We are all interconnected"; the present situation makes these words come true. It seems to

me that this pandemic has in some way pushed the world towards a deeper awareness of being one. What happened in Wuhan is affecting me in the Philippines and anybody else around the world. Finding a medicine in England or Russia will be the solution for the pandemic in Asia... etc. The boundaries have partially collapsed and now whole of humanity, on account of this common enemy, a "gigantic" virus, as big as 1/600 of a human hair, is becoming a family. Jesus said: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." (Jn. 12:32) Probably, the unity of the human family will not necessarily happen in a paradisiac and relaxed atmosphere, but, according to this gospel's quotation, could also be achieved in the common embrace of the crucified God, in a moment of suffering. Something similar is occurring in this pandemic (the New Jerusalem of the book of Revelation comes down from heaven at the end of trials (cf. Rev 21,3)).

Moreover, I think that this pandemic is a call for each one of us to answer personally and very honestly to these two important questions:

1) Am I ready to accept the fact that following Jesus means to experience moments in which, like Mary, I am called **to stand at the foot of the Cross**, exposed to challenges, problems, sufferings, and yet feeling powerless, unable to help, incapable to find solutions, but at the same time present there, close to the dying Jesus? This means to accept the challenge of handing over the role of main actor, and to receive the assignment of working hard behind the scenes, in oblivion, not any longer in the spotlight giving up the many FB's likes (it is the death of the idea of the missionary seen as a hero..., an idealism which is now being taken up by NGOs, volunteers, activists,...)?;

2) Any vocation has its *pros and cons*. Do I accept the fact that being in a **community** is a great opportunity as well as a **limitation** to freedom and independence (probably if we were diocesan priests, we could be more independent and free to help more people through concrete services). Ask ourselves: "What is the priority in my life? Is it my apostolic zeal or rather my bearing witness to the Trinitarian life, with the necessary mediation of my brothers (eg. superiors, the most vulnerable members of the community, the concerns of those who feel more worried than me...)"?

These two fundamental questions must be answered; the response will possibly be a good indicator of the authenticity of one's Xaverian vocation.

Now let us consider opportunities and challenges in different areas of our life for introducing our community planning.

## Community life

This pandemic has compelled us to stay at home. This has become a big challenge for all of us. Isolation has tested our endurance to bear with boredom and the inability to encounter people directly, to go shopping, to do sport, to see something different from our compound...

However, many of us are acknowledging that this quarantine has also given the chance to get to **know each other better** (strengths and weaknesses), to **work together** (laundry, kitchen, house cleaning...), to spend time together in moments of recreation, study, and creativity.

This unwilling home confinement has enhanced our sense of **responsibility for each other (and awareness about ourselves)**. We try to keep fit and healthy. Keeping distance, limiting contacts outside, wearing those uncomfortable face-masks..., but also what I eat, the hours of sleep, the exercise that I do... everything becomes a way of preserving my physical health and not only that; it may become as well an act of love towards my neighbor whose health is affected by mine.

We can take advantage of this pandemic as a time of grace to **examine our personal ability to live together**. Each one of us can ask himself and answer in full honesty if he is able to appreciate this time in terms of opportunity for strengthening our community life. It is a *Kairos* for pondering benefits and costs of living together. Is the beauty of being together overcoming the unavoidable toll of bearing with our brother's limitations by learning how to appreciate his character and attitudes and trying to discover the richness of the others' cultures?

## Apostolic Dimension

It is one of the most affected areas of our life. Personal and community apostolic activities have been prevented by the impossibility to meet with people outside. It seems that we cannot do anything. We are also compelled to humbly acknowledge that in this moment a doctor, a nurse, a scientist, or even a politician, are more important than a priest, a nun, or a seminarian, in concretely addressing the problems of this pandemic. What can I do with my theological expertise when confronted with of a serious case of Covid-19. We are forced to dismiss the imaginary of being considered the frontliners in the Church and society. In this time, we serve concretely other people when we try to limit the spreading of the virus by staying at home or maybe repacking some food for the poor. We are forcibly put behind the lay, who, ahead of us are currently serving society in many ways.

But our being behind the lay, can be an **opportunity** too. First of all, this pandemic is showing us a less clerical Church, which more resembles to the Church described by the Letter to Diognetus: "Christians are *indistinguishable from other men either by nationality, language or*

*customs*. They do not inhabit separate cities of their own, or speak a strange dialect, or follow some outlandish way of life... And yet there is something extraordinary about their lives." Aren't we the ones who are promoting the empowering of the laity in the Church? If so, we should appreciate that now the Church is alive and at work in many Christian people who are bearing witness of the Gospel in the world. Moreover, we should think of ourselves as spiritual animators of this Christian army who are concretely serving the society, of families in distress, of sick. We are not in the leading position, but any army critically needs the backup of cooks in the support role who provide food.

How to live our apostolate in this time? First of all, we do mission if we support and **pray** for the world and for those lay people who are more concretely alleviating the sufferings within society. Then, we can ask ourselves if we have already **explored all our resources and our creativity**, to concretize our nearness and care to the youth, the sick, the non-Christian friends... who are entrusted to us in our apostolate. Probably, this is time to make more use of the means of communication for forming and supporting people who are struggling. This will be very challenging for those who are less familiar to gadgets and computers. At the same time, if we want to work together, we can share our talents in this endeavor. We do hope that none of us is planning to start his apostolate only once the pandemic will be over...

More in general, this pandemic is also questioning us about our understanding of **the core of the Xaverian charism**. We are missionaries, and so we need to move from our country and culture to reach our missionary place. But this pandemic is preventing any travelling. Do we need to dismiss our charism just because there are not flights available? Probably, through this situation, God is telling us that the real core in our charism is not the mere *ad extra* dimension, that is going abroad, living my culture and country, but the *ad gentes*, that is to make Jesus known and welcomed by those who do not know Him yet. This core is not strictly depending on a flight ticket, and then God is asking us to look around us, even in our place, whether there are people that need our testimony and love, people with the hidden desire of the communion with Christ. In the history of the Congregation, St. Guido was called to defend the project of starting a Novitiate in China for Chinese candidates who would be working in China, by saying that we are not for foreigners, but we are for non-Christians (see also the Address of the pope to the Roman Curia last December 21, 2020, in which the pope says that mission is not anymore geographically characterized, because the whole world has become a big missionary territory).

### Intellectual dimension

Study has been badly affected by the pandemic. The second semester of the last year was very difficult. We do hope that the new setting of online classes will be satisfactory. We all know that

the key of success of such a methodology is personal discipline. Any of the brothers is called to this **responsibility**. What we study today is concrete love to those we are called to serve in future through our apostolic activities. The answers and the messages that we will deliver in our endeavors for evangelization are rooted in what we learn today.

The pandemic is also questioning the world, especially those whose life changed radically because experiencing the disease and death of dear ones, with **philosophical and theological questions** that up to some months ago would sound merely theoretical. Let me give you some examples. If God is love, why this pandemic? It is the problem of the reality of the evil in the world (Theodicy). Moreover, where is God in this pandemic? Is he sleeping, cruel, nonexistent? Does he really love his people? With reference to creation, is it possible to say that nature is only good as naive ecologism (also within the Church) is promoting? Does not creation need redemption too? Finally, has really the devil nothing to do with all this global suffering? etc.

We are contributing to shape this very **creative moment**. The times of human disasters has always become a very creative time from a theology point of view. In the history of the Church, challenges have always brought about new understandings (e.g. after the Crusades, French Revolution, World War II, ...). It is also **missionary time**, in which many people, included atheists, are urged to answer these questions. Many people are rediscovering their faith, meanwhile some others experience that their belief is put to test by this global suffering. We are called, therefore, to reflect upon these questions and possibly give meaningful answers, both for us and for the sake of those around us who are possibly tormented by the same interrogations.

### Spiritual life

The pandemic is showing us that the core of religious life and mission is our inner life, our personal relationship with God. We are pushed to become aware of our **being consecrated people**: we are spared for a sacred function which is to collaborate to God's plan of salvation. Mission, especially the miracle of conversions, is more about a spiritual wrestling than doing something. We do more by letting Jesus live in us (cf. Gal 2, 20), rather than doing things, building, helping... If we do things, it is because Jesus asks us to do them.

Staying at home becomes an opportunity for **nurturing our spiritual life**. It has been like this since the origins of religious life in the Church (Anthony of the desert). Normally we complain because of lack of time for meditation due to our busy schedule (traffic to go to school...), and so much work to do for our apostolic activities. Now it seems that these hindrances have magically disappeared. Do we take advantage of it? Do we believe, as I mentioned above, that

prayer is a powerful tool for supporting the action of the Church and for countering the evil which is behind this pandemic?

More personally, each one of us should be able to feel the presence of **Jesus in his life as source of his hope and happiness**, also in time of distress (isolation, fear for being sick, fear of being contaminated, fear of sharing the contagion, boredom...). Jesus is approaching us, walking over the stormy waters, and gives us the courage to overcome our distress up to the point that we dare to walk over these waters towards him (cfr. Mt 14:23-33). Do we believe it? If we do not have the experience of this joy and strength that origin in the communion with Him... can we possibly be missionaries?

### Conclusion

At the start of this new academic year, we are aware of the fact that we need to be very **flexible** in our programs, ready for adaptation and changes according to the situation. We must accept our vulnerability, and also the fact that we may not be able to achieve everything of what we have in our minds and hearts. Everything, including the learning process at LST, will likely be more difficult and possibly less fruitful than when there were regular classes. But this is the situation and we have to play this game, being also aware that the distress of people living around us is incomparable to ours.

We do hope that this pandemic, which in my vision must be considered the work of the evil one, will be transformed by the God's creative power, the Savior, in a **time of grace, mission, and spiritual growth** for all of us. This pandemic is just but one more challenge to the life of the Church (pandemics, persecutions, moral and ideological totalitarianisms, ...). The Church has always overcome trials witnessing a new invasion of spiritual energies in the world. Many of the saints whom we celebrate in our liturgy are people born in troubled times. We do hope that this time of trial may become not only a time of endurance and surviving, but rather time of grace, growth, new understanding, time of mission and time of a deeper communion with God and our neighbors.

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