

INTRODUCTION

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In a homily that he made for Cardinal Dearden in 1979, then Fr. Ken Untener wrote:

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view. The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us....We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.

The reflection of Fr. Untener is a timely reminder for all of us who work in the Lord's vineyard that what we do is a mere participation in God's work. The papers presented during the DaKaTeo online colloquium in January 2021 is a stepping back and a taking of a long view in the face of the difficulties brought about by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

The forum is the attempt of our theological society to theologically reflect on and respond to issues besetting us as a church and as a nation in the context of the pandemic. As you know, COVID-19 has impacted all facets of our life as a society and as church and has resulted to new ways of relating with one another, celebrating our communal and ecclesial life and conducting our daily routines and businesses. Governments all

over the world have understandably imposed lockdowns with varying degrees of strictness, measure which have changed our "normal" ways. While government actions are intended to stem the virus' transmission, they have severely slowed down the economy and caused significant suffering on the poor. The lockdowns have also forced the institutional church to rethink its traditional ways of doing its mission. The "new normal" has revealed to us starkly the woeful inadequacy of our pre-pandemic normal – that our existing structures do not truly promote the human flourishing of all, especially the poor and the environment. It seems evident to those who have eyes to see and ears to hear that we cannot simply keep on doing what we have been used to and that our societal structures need an overhaul in order that they may truly serve the common good and promote the integrity of creation. In many ways, the pandemic has also shown to us the various aspects of ecclesial life in which we are wanting and has challenged us to other ways of doing mission.

The various articles in this issue are diverse attempts to answer the question of what it means to be the community of Jesus Christ in today's context – *steps along the way and opportunities for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest*. While the essays touch on diverse aspects of the church's life and mission, they do not intend to provide a comprehensive answer to all the questions that confront us. They are intended to start an important conversation on matters of common concern and hopefully, challenge each other to think more deeply about them in the light of the Christian faith and be instruments in building a more inclusive and just church and society. In this task, Fr. Untener reminds us, "We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own."

In what ways have our writers been "prophets of a future not our own"? In her article, Joy Candelario explores the Filipino concept, "puwang," in understanding and reshaping the church, particularly the challenge to be "ka-puwang." Dennis Gonzales reflects on the kind of leadership that the church and its leaders are called to exercise, given the challenges that are posed by the pandemic. Karl Gaspar argues that the cultures and spirituality of

indigenous peoples have the necessary resources of coping with the pandemic, from which we could learn. Using Foucault's discourse on "disciplinary power," Daniel Pilario problematizes the concept of the "new normal" which brings with it new forms and structures that lead to the marginalization of the poor. Hence, For Pilario, there is a need for reflexive theologizing that questions the "normal" and leads to more just structures and practices. Among the poor communities that for Kristin Meneses, need particular attention, even before the pandemic but more so now, are the deaf and the PWDs. She challenges the church to actively engage and include them in its pastoral planning and mission. For his part, Reynaldo Raluto argues that the framework of integral ecology is necessary in understanding and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis, both of which are elements of one complex and interrelated reality. For Randy Odchigue, Catholic education must move beyond its concerns for administrative and organizational development and address questions of educational equity and equality, employing a critical pedagogy that questions the dominant neo-liberal and technocratic paradigms.

The "new normal" in our society and the church's life is an opportunity to plant the seeds of a better society. The task is not easy but hopefully, we will "accomplish in our lifetime [even] only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work." That is God's gift and at the same time, our task.

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