

# Critical Theology

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## Introduction

By Scott Kline

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The COVID-19 pandemic has radically disrupted life for many millions of people. On the one hand, the pandemic has brought to light critical issues such as wealth and income disparity, racial disparities in contracting the virus, the underfunding of public health institutions, gaps in social safety networks, and the effects of human activity on climate change. In some countries, these issues have become the grounds for social and political division. On the other hand, the pandemic has also led to numerous examples of people caring for the sick, the aged, and the marginalized not merely because it is their job but because they are committed to a higher moral principle. In other words, the pandemic is highlighting the ambiguity of our humanity. This issue of *Critical Theology* provides a forum for theologians, academics, activists, and other critically engaged people to reflect on the pandemic and our individual and collective responses to it.

Don Schweitzer's article draws on the work of the German theologian Michael Welker and the German social theorist Niklaus Luhmann to explore the hopeful aspects of the pandemic. Harold Wells, in his article, addresses the ecological and theological elements of our human activities and their connections to the pandemic. The third article, by Joe Mancini, a co-founder of The Working Centre in Kitchener, Ontario, considers the pandemic in light of a pre-existing social recession. Eliana Ah Rum Ku, a graduate student, explores the concept of lament in understanding how the pan-

demic has led to racist actions aimed at Chinese and other Southeast Asian populations. The last article, by Megan Shore, is a reflection on isolation and the importance of creative love, a rejection of individualism as the primary organizing principle in society, and the value of human community.

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# A Sign of Hope in the COVID-19 Pandemic

By Don Schweitzer

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As I write in early September 2020, the world remains in the grip of the COVID-19 pandemic. Approximately 29 million cases have been confirmed worldwide, with the infection rate spiking in a number of countries, and nearly 900,000 deaths attributed to it. In addition to the misery and death caused by the virus, there is the economic devastation, its attendant distress, and the emotional suffering caused by physical distancing and other measures intended to prevent the virus' spread. Yet amid all this, the responses of many communities to the pandemic offer hope. In this article, I want to examine the hope that is emerging during this pandemic. I begin by discussing Niklas Luhmann's analysis of the functional differentiation of modern societies. I then turn to Michael Welker's exegesis of chronologically early experiences of the Holy Spirit described in the biblical books of Judges and 1 Samuel. Luhmann's analysis reveals a self-jeopardizing tendency in modern societies. Welker's exegesis identifies how the Holy Spirit works to overcome this. I argue that the responses of many communities to the pandemic show that the Holy Spirit still works in this way to rescue communities from collective helplessness in the face of external threats.

## Niklas Luhmann's Analysis of the Functional Differentiation of Modern Societies

Niklas Luhmann (1927–1998) was professor of sociology at the University of Bielefeld, Germany, until he retired in 1993. In 1961 he studied under Talcott Parsons at Harvard University. He then returned to Germany and developed his own theory of social systems.<sup>1</sup> In this article, I will use the presentation of his theory in his book *Ecological Communication*,<sup>2</sup> where he relates his social analysis to the threat posed to societies by the ecological crisis.

Luhmann describes modern society as a conglomerate of function systems such as the economy, law, politics, education, art, and religion. According to Luhmann, what is distinctive about modern societies is the way each of these parts of society have become autonomous systems that "define their own boundaries."<sup>3</sup> Each system differentiates itself from the others and establishes its own goals and binary code, which it considers to be universally valid and which guides its operations and structures its commu-

nication. Thus, each function system acts and evolves according to its own logic to further its self-production and continuation, without regard for its environment.<sup>4</sup> Other systems form part of the environment to which each system responds, and the various social systems all depend on each other. Yet, because each system communicates by means of its own code and has difficulty processing communication that does not resonate with this, the different systems within society have trouble communicating with each other.

Each system, with some justification, claims to be indispensable for the well-being of society. Yet, each becomes self-referential, curved in upon itself, and views the whole of society and the natural environment only in terms of its perceived self-interests. As Luhmann concludes:

This means that, today, each of the most important subsystems of society is directed to a specific and primary function that pertains to it alone. This formative principle explains the enormous growth of modern society's performance and complexity. At the same time it reveals the problems of integration, i.e., of the negligible resonance capacity among the subsystems of society as well as the relation of society to its environment.<sup>5</sup>

This functional differentiation of society has a self-jeopardizing tendency. It leaves society with no overarching decision-making center<sup>6</sup> and unable to respond collectively in a coordinated fashion to threats like the environmental crisis.

Luhmann's analysis is partly borne out in the response of some communities to the COVID-19 pandemic. Medical research identified physical distancing and the suspension of many normally functioning social systems as necessary measures to slow the spread of the virus. The negative impact that these medical prescriptions would have on social systems like the economy was too much for leaders of some countries to contemplate and for some citizens in many countries to bear. Presidents Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil and Donald Trump of the United States have consistently opposed restrictions on the economy and resisted wearing a face mask, actions necessary to reduce the virus' spread. (Ironically, as this issue of *CT* went to press, Trump had just tested positive for the

coronavirus.) Brazil and the United States, with this kind of national leadership, have for months been at the top of the list of countries with high numbers of COVID-19 infections and related deaths. For both leaders, the logics of political popularity and economic productivity, and a failure to appreciate scientific research and the advice of medical experts, combined to prevent their mandating the collective social response required to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and the number of deaths caused by it.

### **Michael Welker's Exegesis of Early Traditions Regarding the Holy Spirit**

Michael Welker offers a summary of Luhmann's social analysis early on in his book *God the Spirit*.<sup>7</sup> Shortly thereafter, he examines what he describes as early and unclear testimonies to how the Holy Spirit delivers communities out of situations of "insecurity, fear, paralysis, and mere complaint"<sup>8</sup> by restoring communal solidarity and a capacity for collective action. The biblical narratives in Judges and 1 Samuel that Welker studies, in which the Spirit comes upon people like Gideon or King Saul and inspires them to raise an army and defeat the enemies threatening Israel,<sup>9</sup> are violent and on the surface are not very edifying. But Welker convincingly identifies a pattern of divine action in these narratives by which the Holy Spirit, working through charismatic individuals, restores communal solidarity and a capacity for effective collective action. In situations where the community is in helpless disarray before an external threat and capable only of ineffective lament, the Spirit initiates a process of emergence through which the community becomes capable of effectively responding to what threatens it.<sup>10</sup> Welker emphasizes that these biblical narratives do not identify the violence they describe as intrinsic to the work of the Spirit.<sup>11</sup> He also notes that these records of early, unclear experiences of the Holy Spirit raise the need of discerning the Spirit. They should be read in light of Jesus Christ, not Genghis Khan. Just because someone can attract and mobilize people does not mean they are inspired by the Holy Spirit.

While these traditions depict the Spirit as intervening in history, they do not depict it as a force that violates the laws of physics. Instead, these narratives

make it impossible to deny that, although God's Spirit unleashes unexpected forces and produces improbable results, this Spirit acts under the conditions of what is creaturely and finite. The services of imperfect, mortal human beings are enlisted by this Spirit, and they remain real human beings.<sup>12</sup>

Key to this basic way in which the Spirit works is the inspiring of a charismatic leader who, "in a situation

of perplexity and helplessness ... restores loyalty and a capacity for action among the people."<sup>13</sup> The focus and goal of this action is the restoration of the health and well-being of the community, through the creation of a sense of solidarity, community, and commitment to the common good.<sup>14</sup> Welker emphasizes that the leaders involved remain finite, imperfect human beings.<sup>15</sup> The deliverance they help effect is temporary.

Finally, in these early traditions the Spirit's intervention frequently comes at a cost to the leaders and communities involved. Welker observes that people "have every reason to fear becoming involved in the actions of God's Spirit, even when this Spirit is liberating the people from distress and oppression."<sup>16</sup> This work of the Spirit involves risks, sacrifices, hardship, and suffering for those being delivered from external threat. Winston Churchill acknowledged this in more secular terms when he assumed leadership of England during World War II. As he told his Cabinet and repeated to the House of Commons on May 13, 1940: "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat."<sup>17</sup>

### **The Importance of Religious and Cultural Traditions**

It is worth noting that in these early narratives, the leaders whom the Spirit empowered did not work in a religious/cultural vacuum. The Exodus tradition formed part of the religious context in which these leaders acted.<sup>18</sup> The people they led had a cultural memory of their ancestors being delivered by God from external threat, and of communal traditions, obligations, and aspirations arising from this. This kind of religious/cultural background can facilitate or obstruct the pattern of the Spirit's action that Welker identifies. In Luhmann's terms, it can enable a leader's communication to gain the resonance<sup>19</sup> necessary to mobilize people, or hinder this.

Drawing on the work of Max Weber, Gregory Baum identified several key aspects to the work of charismatic leaders. First, they articulate the hidden, unseen oppression of the people, and in this way gain a hearing from them.<sup>20</sup> Second, they articulate a new symbolic imagination in which this oppression is overcome.<sup>21</sup> To be successful over time, they also need to propose a rational strategy guided by a universal principle of justice by which they are willing to be judged. Baum's analysis illuminates how charismatic leaders continue to function in the present. To this a further observation can be added. As a charismatic leader, Martin Luther King, Jr. did not invent out of nothing the symbolic imagination he presented. He appropriated the Christian traditions of the Black church, a powerful institution in the Black community. These traditions also had resonance for many white people. King portrayed the Black community as the Israelites on their

way out of bondage, the Civil Rights struggle of the 1960s as a new Exodus, himself as a new Moses, and a desegregated United States as their promised land.

Charismatic leaders are frequently portrayed as opposite to institutions and institutional leadership. The two often conflict, as Bernie Sanders did with the Democratic Party establishment in the US. But charismatic leaders like Sanders usually have a dialectical relationship to the institutions and traditions of the communities they lead. They often oppose the performance and orientation of these institutions and the current social practices of their people. But they draw upon the traditions that these institutions embody and carry, and upon the cultural memory of the people they seek to mobilize. King opposed the Black church practice of remaining quiet and subservient in the face of white oppression, but he based his message upon the religious hopes and traditions that the Black church carried. He also excoriated white churches and white liberals for remaining silent about racial prejudice and patronizing Black people struggling against it.

The presence of cultural and religious traditions and the way these can enable or hinder the work of the Spirit have been factors in the responses of many communities to the pandemic.

### **Some Canadian Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic**

When viewed in light of Luhmann's social analysis and Welker's exegesis, the responses of many communities to the COVID-19 pandemic are a sign of hope. We turn now to analyze several of these.

On March 18, 2020, the territory of Nunavut responded to the pandemic by declaring a state of emergency. The governing authorities banned public gatherings, closed schools, urged residents to practise physical distancing, and closed the territory's borders to most non-residents. The Yukon and the Northwest Territories invoked similar measures a few days later. Northern communities in territories like Nunavut are especially vulnerable to the pandemic due to their limited medical infrastructure. Government-mandated lockdowns in these territories disrupted people's lives, children's schooling, and the economy, causing significant suffering. But they have been effective. As of mid-September 2020, Nunavut still had no confirmed COVID-19 cases. The Yukon has had fewer than 20. The Northwest Territories has had fewer than 10, with zero fatalities. Joshua Arreak, Mayor of Pond Inlet, Nunavut, said that Inuit history and traditions helped prepare his community and others like it to cope with the hardships of lockdown and physical distancing.<sup>22</sup> Responsible leadership also helped. In late April 2020, a person in Pond Inlet tested positive for the virus.<sup>23</sup>

Lockdown measures were increased. In a situation of fear and confusion, community leaders urged people to remain calm and be compassionate to one another.<sup>24</sup> Community groups and individuals offered support to those in need. This pattern of volunteer efforts to provide necessities and support for people has occurred repeatedly across the northern territories during the pandemic.<sup>25</sup>

In Saskatchewan, on March 21, 2020, Pelican Narrows, part of Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation, instituted a lockdown in response to the pandemic.<sup>26</sup> Other First Nations communities across Saskatchewan and elsewhere in Canada did the same. Many established checkpoints at entry points to reserves, restricting who could enter. Some set curfews and limited public gatherings. In the background to this were resurgent Indigenous communities' sense of nationhood and a tradition of asserting sovereignty over their lands for the sake of their people, often against white opposition. Many First Nations communities responded to the pandemic by constructively exercising this sovereignty, sometimes amid legal uncertainties.<sup>27</sup> In Saskatchewan, an outbreak of infections occurred at La Loche and nearby Clearwater River Dene Nation. Apart from this, measures taken by First Nations communities have to date been largely successful in preventing the spread of the virus in their midst, despite many of these communities being vulnerable to the pandemic because of crowded housing, a lack of medical infrastructure, and difficulties providing running water. Here again, communities were able to mount an effective collective response to this external threat.

Canadian federal and provincial jurisdictions represent more complex communities with larger, more diverse populations than Canada's northern territories and First Nations communities. Here, Luhmann's diagnosis that functionally differentiated societies are unable to respond collectively and effectively to an external threat should have been borne out in the COVID-19 pandemic. Fortunately, for the most part, his diagnosis has not been realized.

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 virus outbreak a pandemic. On March 13, Health Canada advised Canadians to avoid non-essential travel, and on March 18 banned foreign nationals from entering Canada. On March 21, the Canada-United States border was closed to non-essential travel. Between March 12 and 22, all provinces and territories declared states of emergency. People were urged to stay home and to practise physical distancing. Educational facilities, public playgrounds, and non-essential businesses were closed. The cancellation of large public gatherings affected professional and amateur sports, the arts, religious

organizations, and many cultural activities. By mid-April, the Canadian economy had lost 3 million jobs. The country sank into its worst economic recession in decades. The federal government offered financial assistance to many affected by the pandemic.

Here, amid great uncertainty and anxiety, a collective and coordinated response was generated that shut down large sections of major social systems like the economy, education, law, art, and religion, effectively overruling their binary codes and self-referentiality to protect society from an external threat. The response has not been perfect, but it has proven effective thus far. The rates of new COVID-19 cases and deaths resulting from it peaked in early May and have generally declined since, although a second wave is now underway. The response involved “considerable cooperation between federal and provincial officials and politicians”<sup>28</sup> that crossed party lines. The pandemic has not been highly politicized, especially in its early days. Some “government leaders and officials in Canada were late in recognizing the seriousness of COVID-19,”<sup>29</sup> but by the end of March none questioned the danger it posed. Political leaders from various parties and public health leadership played a crucial role in the response by successfully enlisting large-scale public adherence to preventative measures,<sup>30</sup> despite the impositions and loss of income this brought to many people.

Responding to the pandemic has been a learning process for Canadian medical professionals, civic leaders, and the general population. There have been terrible tragedies, like the failure of some long-term care homes in Ontario and Quebec to protect their residents from the virus. Low-income and racially marginalized communities appear to have suffered higher infection rates than other social groups. Still, in this collective response to the pandemic, one can see the pattern of deliverance that Welker identifies in the narratives in Judges and 1 Samuel. From an initial situation of fear, uncertainty, indecisiveness, and failure to appreciate the threat, communities were enabled to make an effective collective response. The challenge of a complex, functionally differentiated society mounting coordinated collective action in response to an external threat was met, at the cost of great hardship to many.

A number of background factors probably facilitated this response. One may have been the influence of universal medical care, which is an established feature of Canadian culture, on the social imaginary of many Canadians. In situations characterized by risk and uncertainty, such cultural factors can take on greater importance in decision making, for better or for worse.<sup>31</sup> Here the sense that health care is the responsibility of society as a whole was highly beneficial.

## Conclusion

In the ways that communities in northern Canada, a number of First Nations communities in Saskatchewan and elsewhere, and the Canadian federal and provincial governments have responded to the pandemic, one can see variations of the pattern identified by Welker by which the Spirit works to deliver communities from helplessness in the face of grave danger. The Holy Spirit has been at work here, enabling these communities to defend themselves against the threat of the COVID-19 virus.

Luhmann’s analysis of how functional differentiation can make modern societies incapable of effectively responding to threats to society as a whole insightfully diagnoses a dangerous social development. It is one of several factors that have led the German social theorist Jürgen Habermas to describe contemporary societies as caught up in a process of “modernization spinning out of control.”<sup>32</sup> The response of many communities to the pandemic is a hopeful sign in relation to this. The Holy Spirit, operating anonymously, remains able to overcome this dysfunction and deliver communities from helplessness and danger. This is never an automatic process or a permanent achievement. It can be blocked by cultural or religious factors, by sinful social structures, and by bad leadership. Still, in a globalized world where unforeseeable risks continue to emerge, the Holy Spirit remains a source of hope, comfort, and deliverance. The Holy Spirit is able to deliver communities from the kind of social paralysis that Luhmann identifies. Theologians should attune themselves to recognize how and where this is or isn’t taking place, and why.<sup>33</sup>

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1 For a summation of this, see Niklas Luhmann, *Theory of Society Volumes 1 and 2* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012/2013).

2 Niklas Luhmann, *Ecological Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

3 *Ibid.*, 6.

4 *Ibid.*, 13–14.

5 *Ibid.*, 34–35.

6 *Ibid.*, 118.

7 Michael Welker, *God the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 29–34.

8 *Ibid.*, 56.

9 Judges 6 and 7; 1 Samuel 11.

10 Welker, *God the Spirit*, 56–58, 64–65.

11 *Ibid.*, 56–58.

12 *Ibid.*, 55–56.

13 *Ibid.*, 56.

14 *Ibid.*, 57.

15 *Ibid.*, 59–60.

16 *Ibid.*, 60, 60–63.

17 Winston Churchill, "Blood, Toil, Tears, and Sweat" (May 13, 1940), <https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1940-the-finest-hour/blood-toil-tears-and-sweat-2>. Accessed Sept. 14, 2020.

18 Judges 6:7-10.

19 Luhmann, *Ecological Communication*, 15–21.

20 Gregory Baum, *Religion and Alienation* (New York: Paulist Press, 1975), 170.

21 Ibid.

22 Eva Holland, "Weathering the First Wave," *Up Here* 36/3+4 (Summer 2020), 38.

23 It was later found to be a false positive; *ibid.*, 38–39.

24 *Nunatsiaq News*, May 7, 2020, <https://nunatsiaq.com/stories/article/90099>. Accessed Sept. 15, 2020.

25 Holland, "Weathering the First Wave," 38.

26 CBC News, March 23, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatchewan/covid-19-first-nation-peter-ballantyne-pelican-narrows-1.5506285>. Accessed Sept. 14, 2020.

27 CBC News, May 8, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/sudbury/first-nations-borders-checkpoints-law-1.5557691>. Accessed Sept. 14, 2020.

28 Allan S. Detsky and Isaac I. Bogoch, "COVID-19 in Canada: Experience and Response," *Journal of the American Medical Association*, August 10, 2020, E1.

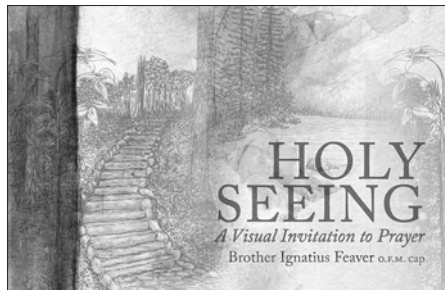
29 *Ibid.*, E2.

30 *Ibid.*

31 Ulrich Beck, *Power in the Global Age* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2005), 103.

32 Jürgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2008), 211.

33 I thank Lorne Calvert and Glenn Tait for helpful conversations regarding this paper's topic.



## Holy Seeing: A Visual Invitation to Prayer

BY BROTHER IGNATIUS FEAVER  
O.F.M. CAP

Since the early church, Christians have used images as an invitation to enter into a sacred place of prayer. This visual invitation has come to be known as *Visio Divina*, or "holy seeing." In *Holy Seeing*, artist and spiritual director Brother Ignatius Feaver O.F.M. Cap invites us to enter into evocative black-and-white illustrations with the inner eye of our soul.

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—Mary Klein, Ph.D., M.A. in Ministry and Spirituality

An artist and spiritual director, **Brother Ignatius Feaver, O.F.M. Cap** has been a member of the Capuchin Franciscan Order for over fifty years. He conducts retreats and workshops in Franciscan spirituality throughout the world. Recently, he served as a member of an advisory board working with the then Senior Curator of the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), Katharine Lochnan, on the exhibit *Mystical Landscapes*. During the exhibit he offered some workshops at the AGO on the 19th-century French artist Charles Marie Dulac, on *Visio Divina*, *Holy Seeing*, that inspired this book.

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# The Virus and the Climate: Linked in the Anthropocene

By Harold Wells

Emmanuel College, University of Toronto

The two crises are closely linked. Not that one has simply caused the other, but that they have roots in common. Both are manifestations of the “Anthropocene,” that new geological epoch in which human beings – at 7 billion the most “successful” species on earth – have utterly dominated the planet, altering intricately connected ecosystems and even the composition of the atmosphere.<sup>1</sup> We have done this mainly through the emission of carbon dioxide by the burning of fossil fuels, the primary source of global warming, but also by destroying forests and encroaching upon the habitats of other creatures. Created in God’s image, we have indeed filled the earth and subdued it, and extended our “dominion over the birds of the air and over the fish of the sea, and over every living creature that moves upon the earth” (Gen. 1:28).<sup>2</sup> Our dominion does not stop there, but continues to impact the forests, the oceans, and the very patterns of the weather. “Anthropocene,” however, implies not species success, but our collective failure to live within planetary boundaries, and the folly of measuring “progress” by GDP growth. It counts as systemic sin. We have forgotten that infinite growth is impossible on a finite planet,<sup>3</sup> and we have ignored the scriptural injunction to “cultivate the garden, and take care of it” (Gen. 2:15).<sup>4</sup> Since climate change and the spread of pandemics threaten the Creator’s hope for humanity and the earth, they warrant critical theological reflection.

How has human dominance resulted in this particular pandemic, COVID-19? Like other recent epidemics, SARS and Ebola, it derives from close contact with wild animals. Specifically, in the case of Ebola, the Center for Disease Control (USA) found its origin in “population growth, encroachment into forested areas, and direct interaction with wildlife in Central Africa.”<sup>5</sup> There is some controversy about the exact origin of COVID-19, but it is generally agreed that it is derived from contact with animals, probably bats, in or around the “sprawling city” of Wuhan, China.<sup>6</sup> Mass urbanization and deforestation, if they do not kill wild animals, or drive them to extinction, push them closer to people. As an ever-growing population spreads out and increases the consumption of meat, zoonotic pathogens are introduced more and more into crowded mega-cities.<sup>7</sup> With thousands of airline flights

every day, a virus travels free and easily expands into a pandemic.<sup>8</sup> Our own slaughter of animals is nicely hidden and antiseptic. However, to obtain meat, we occupy great tracts of land, using up food and water to raise animals, destroying forests and wetlands, even rain forests, the precious carbon sinks that protect us from climate change. Our two crises, then, though distinct, are part of one phenomenon: our overextended “dominion” – the Anthropocene – which, at its worst, could render our planet “uninhabitable.”<sup>9</sup>

## Not Quite Comparable

The two crises, however, are not created equal. Our focus on the virus has diverted us from the greater threat: climate change.<sup>10</sup> The death toll of this virus (as of early September 2020) is approaching one million worldwide and growing rapidly; it also means deep economic hardship for many. It is dreadful and not to be trivialized, but not comparable to what we would experience from full-blown climate change. The virus is a short-term, highly visible calamity, while climate change is a slow-burning, mortal threat that many still deny. Already, climate change is killing people. The World Health Organization estimates that some 7 million people die *every year* from direct or indirect effects of climate change: withering heat, violent weather, floods, fires, and food and water shortages. But also we are increasingly plagued by asthma from smoke, migration of tropical diseases (malaria, dengue fever, Lyme disease) into newly warmer climates, and afflictions caused by mosquitoes, ticks, and rodents that survive milder winters.<sup>11</sup>

Besides spreading disease, major climate change would bring countless coastal cities under water, as well as huge tracts of agricultural land; in other places, drought and desert. With a tipping point of escalating disasters, the process can become irreversible. Geophysicist Joseph Romm explains that “... if CO2 levels rise too fast, they overwhelm the ability of natural systems to absorb that CO2. In fact, if CO2 levels rise fast enough, the resulting warming and climate change can trigger amplifying feedback loops that cause natural systems to release more CO2.”<sup>12</sup>

Another lethal greenhouse gas is methane, released from the permafrost of colder regions. Methane has

even greater heat-trapping capacity than carbon dioxide.<sup>13</sup> When we reach a cascade of feedback loops, there will be no vaccine to rescue us. We can expect millions of refugees fleeing starvation and violence. We can expect a heightening of global conflict over scarce land and resources.

Such major destruction of our physical environment will be accompanied by profound impacts upon human affairs. A historian, John Michael Greer, points out that “war, famine and pestilence are common events in the decline and fall of a civilization.”<sup>14</sup> Every society depends on its relationships with the natural world and on the necessities of survival: keeping the water flowing and the harvests coming in. With references to post-Roman Europe and post-Mycenean Greece, Greer argues that when such basics are compromised, what follows is a “dark age” of economic collapse and political unravelling. When a governing class proves unable to cope with multiple crises, charismatic leaders (warlords) take over, “violence becomes the final arbiter of power, and the rule of law becomes a polite fiction.”<sup>15</sup> This implies the breakdown of cultural institutions: schools and universities, hospitals, the practice of religion, science, and the arts.

### **What Can We Learn from the Pandemic Crisis?**

Has the present pandemic crisis helped reduce the threat of climate change? Has it taught us anything? Can we see it as “providential” in any way?

Larissa Basso, a climate researcher at Stockholm University, informs us that with much industrial activity throughout the world shut down, thousands of airplanes grounded, and automobile and truck travel severely cut back, carbon dioxide emissions were reduced 17% by early April. She reports that the air is cleaner, and the skies and waters are clearer. But emission reduction estimates for the whole of 2020 range from 4.2 to 7.5%, compared to an overall decrease of emissions of 1.4% during the recession of 2008–09. However, in 2010 emissions were up again by 5.1%.<sup>16</sup> A temporary emissions drop does not produce a real turning point against climate change. It does not reflect the structural change to the global economy that is required.

What can we learn from the pandemic experience? First, we note the importance of science.<sup>17</sup> Science trumps ideology and religious delusions. Facts about the physical world can only be provided by peer-reviewed empirical science and are essential to any successful handling of both these crises. Refusal to listen to science, in both instances, is deadly.

Further, the pivotal role of government is evident. There is no way the market system could handle a

pandemic, much less global climate change.<sup>18</sup> Only governments can establish systems of universal basic income, which will surely become necessary to avoid economic chaos. Governments have the capacity to sponsor scientific research, mobilize public cooperation in a crisis, impose taxes, and offer incentives. The global strategies needed to cope with both pandemics and climate change will require the international cooperation of governments. Perhaps it is possible now to revive interest in the words of the apostle Paul: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God” (Rom. 13:1). Perhaps Paul overstated the matter. This is hardly a favourite text for critical theologies. It has been used to defend slavery, apartheid, and other oppressive systems and regimes. The apostle, who himself engaged in civil disobedience, knew well that the authority of an emperor or a king is never more than penultimate. Yet he also knew that government is essential to social order. By faith we may discern the divine presence at work through government.

Could the pandemic itself be seen as providential? Emphatically, we cannot regard the pandemic as an “act of God.” In light of Christ, and in light of our scientific understanding, it is not credible that God sends catastrophes as punishment for sin. We know that the Creator, Source of all life and power, does not swoop down to solve our problems in a supernatural manner. Our medieval forebears were not saved from the great plagues by miraculous cures. No divine intervention delivered the Hebrews facing exile to slavery in Babylon, nor Jesus facing Roman crucifixion, nor the Jews at Auschwitz. No *deus ex machina*<sup>19</sup> will cancel nature’s laws, or human autonomy, to overcome pandemics or climate change. Rather, the Creator Spirit is at work in the marvellous vitality and restorative powers of nature. Besides that, “God ... works in us and others by the Spirit.”<sup>20</sup>

Considering God’s activity through us, we are reminded of “the option for the poor” – the basic ethical precept of liberationist and critical theologies, founded in the gospel of love. It has been the elderly, crowded into long-term-care homes, and low-wage workers, racial minorities, and migrant labourers, often living in congested quarters and lacking good nutrition and medical care, who suffer most. This holds for climate change, too. The poorest nations, with the least capacity to adjust, will succumb first to the onslaught of climate disasters. Our struggle against these crises is also our struggle for social justice.

It lies beyond the scope of this brief essay to explore practical solutions. But in faith, we are never without hope. Our “dominion” on Earth is a fact; it is a question of how we exercise it in humility before God. Creative thinkers propose a “No growth economy” or a “Green



New Deal” of renewable energy.<sup>21</sup> The situation in which we find ourselves demands the best ingenuity of the physical and social sciences, the wisest exercise of government, the commitment of environmental movements, and the active cooperation of all the people if we are to survive and fulfill our task as humans: “to cultivate the garden, and take care of it.”

**Harold Wells** is an ordained minister of The United Church of Canada and emeritus professor of Systematic Theology at Emmanuel College, University of Toronto.

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3 Message from the co-presidents of the Club of Rome, March 2020: [www.clubofrome.org/climate-emergency/covid-19-pandemic](http://www.clubofrome.org/climate-emergency/covid-19-pandemic). Accessed Sept. 15, 2020.

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# The Social Recession and the COVID-19 Pandemic

By Joe Mancini

The Working Centre, Kitchener, Ontario

Before we experienced COVID-19, we were already in a Social Recession. For example, each year, mental health or addiction issues affect 20% of the population. We tolerate that 34% of Ontario high school students deal with moderate to serious distress, like anxiety and depression. Our culture has a radiating frustration that you see in those angry protests against COVID-related shutdowns and public health measures. The Social Recession is not new; it is the consequence of an increasing dependence on materialistic values as the foundational organizing principle for society. In what follows, I want to argue that the COVID-19 pandemic not only highlights the dehumanizing effects of the Social Recession but also provides us with an opportunity to begin to work toward a future rooted in renewed social-ecological vision.

## What Is the Social Recession and What Can We Learn from COVID-19?

The Social Recession is the weary feeling we have that our culture turns its back on supporting important underlying personal and social connections. In our culture, is enough time given to truly support families and the raising of children? Do we have time to reflect and integrate the Indigenous worldview, which calls us to protect the forests, air, water, and soil? Do we have the patience to allow for a sharing culture to emerge in neighbourhoods? Do we have the ability to promote a culture of mutual aid, where each person is responsible for putting the community above themselves? Do we support cultural mechanisms to teach the use of tools wisely for building our neighbourhoods and community? Can we cooperate together to build or share housing to reduce homelessness?

The COVID shutdown has been unprecedented, putting a halt to almost all commuting, shopping, schooling, working, vacationing, and travelling. This situation is completely unique and it's a revelation, like being on a retreat from daily distractions. This new reality offers time to think about the meaning of family, community, work, and the natural world we depend on. Let me briefly highlight four interconnected structures that I see as opportunities for us to consider as we make our way through this pandemic: materialism,

precarious work, ecological destruction, and homelessness.

First, COVID-19 puts into perspective the machinery of society that overproduces commuting, shopping, travelling, and other actions that have yielded negative social outcomes. The revelation reveals a society of disconnections and misplaced priorities. In this lull, we have to think about the overwhelming negative social outcomes and how we respond to them. We have time to rethink why we have acclimatized ourselves to a constant Social Recession in the midst of abundance and busy work. A retreat is a perfect mechanism to uncover the problems of materialism and why our reliance on making money, increasing status, and purchasing bigger and better things is a barrier to good relationships. Materialism skews our values, clouds our sense of purpose, erodes our autonomy, and threatens the vitality of our social connections. Our potential well-being diminishes in a flood of goods and services.

Second, at the heart of materialism is the desperate necessity for the economy to produce work hours. Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, precarious work had become a crucial structure supporting our consumer culture. Precarious jobs tend to be unsatisfying and, of course, unsustainable. For example, data from the US economy shows that about 20 million jobs were created just after the 2008 Great Recession. Yet, in just three weeks of pandemic measures, more than 20 million jobs were eliminated. The same is true in Canada, where 3 million jobs were created in the past 10 years and more than 3 million jobs were eliminated in a matter of weeks. And yet, Canada remains without a jobs policy, and many of the jobs in this economy continue to be precarious.

Third, we need to reflect on the Earth's ecological systems. The work we have been doing is undermining the Earth's fragile ecology, even though important jobs in manufacturing, health, community services, and agriculture are at best prioritized as secondary. Why else are these sectors scrambling to adapt to the COVID situation? To address the Social Recession, we need to zero in on how our economy is wasteful. We

need to find savings by harnessing internal resources. We need to strengthen community at the grassroots.

Take, for example, the \$7.5 billion that is spent on advertising in Canada, mostly through the Internet. What about the poor social outcomes that come from creating unrealistic images of wealth, status, and power that will not be attained, only desired? The trick of advertising is to keep everyone on a constant consumer treadmill, while COVID-19 has shown this faux exercising to be exhausting. Or how about the time spent commuting? In 2016, at least 1.5 million Canadians spent at least 2 hours commuting from home to work and back each day. The loss to personal time, the constant stress of driving or taking public transit, and the cost to relationships contributes to strained social relations. COVID has given us time to rethink the cost of commuting, and climate change makes it imperative.

And fourth, COVID has highlighted the reality that people experiencing homelessness are vulnerable and on the rise in cities across North America. In many respects, homelessness is the result of a systemic misallocation of our resources, which leaves many without access to shelter. There is a significant cost to police, healthcare, municipalities, and social services that spend precious resources blocking access to buildings, moving people around, dealing with drug addictions and worsening physical health, and playing musical chairs with limited housing units. The worst is the drift to criminality for those who are shut out. In the midst of gangs, drugs, abject poverty, and violence, the homeless are dispossessed without the means to flee or find alternatives. Each year, in downtown areas the social cost keeps adding up and the response is not up to the challenge.

The excesses of a consumer society do little to build the common good. Why attempt to build community when everyone is distracted by the anxious need to be entertained? Communities don't hold together, so why root and invest one's energy into a neighbourhood, especially when there is always a better one around the corner? Who bothers to search out work where pay is secondary to the quality of the relationships and the service to the community? As Tim Kasser points out in *The High Cost of Materialism*, people's fragile self-worth, their poor relationships, and their insecurities are all to be exploited by the consumerist system that hopes for people to choose rootlessness over building the community around them.<sup>1</sup> This is the root of the Social Recession.

### **Thoughts on How to Build Community in a (Post-) COVID World**

Growing carbon emissions, increasing debt, and poor social outcomes are all pointing us to recommit to

reworking the economy. How do we exit from what Tim Jackson calls "the iron cage of consumerism"?<sup>2</sup> The transition will integrate environmental protection with a deeper focus on building families and neighbourhoods by asking these kinds of questions: How can we strengthen communities? How can we burn less carbon? How can we strengthen the connections between each other? How can we lessen the material waste of overconsumption?

Here is a short list of immediate projects. We have learned from COVID and climate change that we must reduce commuting and especially travel by air until real carbon alternatives are found. If we work fewer hours, there is more time to get around by bike, to cook at home, and to produce food in our neighbourhoods. Working less results in freed-up hours that can be used to develop new skills and interests. This is a positive way of building neighbourhood connections and social trust.

We need to reinspire job creation aimed at expanding urban agriculture, jobs focused on making buildings more energy efficient, jobs to create community resources to help people live in the community with less money, jobs that plant forests and naturalize paved-over environments. These are all jobs that meaningfully start to address climate change and make our communities better. This the work we can do to overcome the Social Recession.

If we want to change the conditions of the Social Recession, we have to create time to support each other. The goal of the economy and consumerism is to keep our relationships guarded and on edge. During the lockdown, when face-to-face shopping was all but prohibited, it brought into focus meaningful family connections. The lockdown demonstrated the importance of building a society where trust and companionship are a primary goal. There is a great deal of room to expand our ability to help people through troubled times. We need to reduce the demands of the economy for the sake of building our communities.

At The Working Centre, we see the importance of allowing people the space to problem solve together. Each day, in all our public spaces, we combine useful tools with a community commitment to listen to and support people to overcome issues that get in the way. This is the kind of work that builds community and enhances our social relationships. We recognize that economic growth will not save us from climate change. As Juliet Schor writes, "we will not arrest ecological decline or regain financial health without also introducing a different rhythm of work, consumption, and daily life, as well as alterations in a number of system-wide structures."<sup>3</sup> Here in Canada, and indeed in North America, we could learn from the

European Commission, which is attempting to create a euro-recovery plan focused on promoting electric vehicle sales, renewable energy projects, and making new, green technologies economically viable. The UK will invest \$2.4 billion to promote cycling and walking. We can also look to South Korea, which plans to double solar incentives to promote rooftop systems in homes and commercial buildings, and to China, which will build more than 78,000 electric-vehicle charging stations. Renewable energy is a softer path toward creating a society that is distributive and regenerative and where limits and relationships are central. Whatever actions we ultimately take, we will first need to work together to find the savings to invest in a different future. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided us with an opportunity to consider an immense number

of possibilities for a new future. We can overcome the Social Recession with new thinking, acting, and building relationships toward a better common future.

**Joe Mancini** is a co-founder of *The Working Centre* in Kitchener, Ontario.

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2 See Tim Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth: Foundations for the Economy of Tomorrow*, 2nd ed. (London: Taylor & Francis, 2016), ch. 6.

3 Juliet Schor, "The Principles of Plenitude," *Minding Nature* 3:2 (2010), <https://www.humansandnature.org/the-principles-of-plenitude>. Accessed Oct. 3, 2020. See also her book *True Wealth: How and Why Millions of Americans are Creating a Time-Rich, Ecologically Light, Small-Scale, High-Satisfaction Economy* (New York: Penguin, 2011).



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Bancroft (front) and Mikael serve community lunch at the Worth a Second Look parking lot in Kitchener, Ontario. The lunch is a service of The Working Centre, which is adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Amy Moneray, Tony, Angela, and Brendan pose against a wall in Heit Lane in Kitchener, Ontario. Amy and Tony are homeless and want to get married. Brendan is a friend. Angela is asked to pose by Amy. They are receiving services from The Working Centre.



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# COVID-19, Asian-phobia, and Lament

By Eliana Ah Rum Ku

Doctoral student, Emmanuel College, University of Toronto

Amid the suffering of the pandemic, Asians, particularly Southeast Asians, have endured insults, assaults, and lynching on the streets of the United States, Canada, and Europe. My concern is that this is due to racism – or, in crude terms, the hatred of Chinese people and people of Southeast Asian ancestry.<sup>1</sup>

As these and similar cases bear witness, the Asian-phobia inflamed by COVID-19 might be a form of hidden oppression and alienation behind the mask of “safety.” We need to highlight these cases and their causes in a way that creates empathy and solidarity without necessarily blaming anyone. Resorting to a biblical understanding of lament could be a way to do this, because it may work to keep the focus on God, without losing sight of human suffering and injustice, and thus contributing to the resilience of society.<sup>2</sup>

First, the voices of Asians need to be heard with respect, without being overwhelmed by other voices. Reading Lamentations allows us to hear multiple voices of suffering, which are not unified, and avoid having a single one dominating.<sup>3</sup> This could be an act of breaking the silence and telling the truth about the suffering of Asians amid the pandemic. Also, as Lamentations refutes easy hope, we can learn that the voice of Asian-phobia takes into account the complexity and truth of life, in contrast to the temptation simply to seek to relieve the pain.<sup>4</sup> Reading Lamentations can offer a space to name Asian suffering and for people to mourn together.

Second, lament prayers can offer a safe place to speak honestly about suffering to God. The linguistic ability of people who are suffering can be degraded. Those suffering from Asian-phobia are not free from the gaze of society and may have isolated themselves. Here, lament prayer breaks the silence, letting people move “from the silence to lament.”<sup>5</sup> Besides, laments are intended to serve as prayers of intercession.<sup>6</sup> This is because laments invite us to gather not only our own sorrows, wounds, and disasters, but also the wounds, anger, and violence of the world.<sup>7</sup> Thus, lament prayers

for those suffering from the pandemic, including from Asian-phobia, can help a broken community by giving members an opportunity to share their anger, despair, and suffering.

Third, practising lament in preaching can invite a community to find a collective sense of lament, which says that indifference to injustice is implicit consent to injustice. Preaching lament brings pain into a liturgy as a public lament. It can lead the community to sympathize with and mourn the voices of suffering of a few Asians, while resisting the unjust reality of Asian-phobia publicly, and hence leading to the possibility of recovery.

It is not possible to say that lament completely prevents hatred and retaliation. Without lament, however, pursuing a resolution of hatred against Asians, through its ongoing recognition and release, would be difficult to do.<sup>8</sup> Thus, in the era of Asian-phobia, by breaking the silence that can realign with racial oppression, it is time for the practice of lament to be used to reveal disenfranchised grief, to offer a place to speak out, to resist social injustice, and to refuse to accept easy hope.

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1 Examples can be found in Helier Cheung, Zhaoyin Feng and Boer Deng, “Coronavirus: What Attacks on Asians Reveal about American Identity,” BBC News (May 27, 2020). <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52714804>. Accessed Sept. 8, 2020; “Racism Growing Conspicuous against Asian Americans,” *Global Times* (June 5, 2020), <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1190650.shtml>. Accessed Sept. 8, 2020; Sebastiaan Quekel and Ruben Koenes, “Yanii (16) moet onder dwang sorry zeggen en krijgt trap in gezicht: ‘Wie is de baas?’” *de gelderlander* (June 23, 2020).

2 Luke A. Powery, *Spirit Speech: Lament and Celebration in Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2009), 120–21.

3 Kathleen M. O’Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 84.

4 *Ibid.*, 4–5.

5 Phil C. Zylla, *The Roots of Sorrow* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 81.

6 Tikva Simone Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 38.

7 O’Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, 132.

8 *Ibid.*, 129.

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# Loneliness on the Island of Isolation: A Reflection

By Megan Shore

King's University College, London, Ontario

In April 2020, Pope Francis had to share his Holy Week message to Christians around the world by video.<sup>1</sup> In an attempt to stem the spread of the virus, governments around the world closed schools and parks, banned outdoor activities and group gatherings, and enforced physical distancing and stay-at-home measures. By May, as the virus spread to South America, Africa (especially southern Africa), and India, much of the world's population was experiencing lockdowns, quarantines, and other pandemic measures. Mental health professionals raised concerns that quarantining of this magnitude would lead to feelings associated with being isolated and alone. On the one hand, social isolation made sense as a public health strategy to combat the pandemic but, on the other hand, the reality of so many people being isolated created new health concerns.

The word "isolation" comes from the Latin word *insula*, which has become the word "island," presumably because being alone on an island is what isolation feels like. Isolation can occur in many forms. In the case of public health, isolation occurs when a sick person, who has a contagious infection or disease, is separated from those who are healthy to prevent cross-contamination. It is designed to protect the public from contracting the contagion, not to protect the person in isolation. Today, the familiar home isolation is when a person is required to stay at home because they have a contagious disease or virus, whereas medical isolation means that the person is too sick to be at home and is placed in a hospital for a period of withdrawal from their community. For many, isolation for public health purposes, such as to combat the spread of the coronavirus, is a new experience. Regrettably, it was not new to me.

When my elder son was two and half years old and my newborn son was just two months old, I found myself in isolation in the hospital due to recurrent *Clostridium difficile*.

*C. difficile*, or "C. diff," as it is commonly called, is a bacterium that can cause symptoms ranging from diarrhea to life-threatening inflammation of the colon. It is a highly contagious bacterium that is naturally found in the gut of many people, yet it does not necessarily cause them harm. The harm comes with the

administration of antibiotics. A problem arises when an antibiotic attacks all the bacteria in the body, leaving the *C. diff* the lone surviving bacterium, which can easily occur because it is immune to many antibiotics. In this case, the *C. diff* can not only thrive but can take over the bowels and intestines. It is a leading cause of infectious morbidity and mortality in Canada. It can return, with each recurrence often worse than the prior one. It can lead to antibiotic resistance, which means a subsequent *C. diff* infection can be lethal.

Usually when you hear about *C. diff*, it is not associated with a healthy mid-30-year-old. Unbeknownst to me, I managed to bring this home from hospital, along with my beautiful new baby boy. I had a planned C-section due to complications of a previous pregnancy. About a week after my discharge, I developed an infection in my incision that prompted my physician to prescribe antibiotics. Shortly after I finished the antibiotics, I started feeling nauseous and generally unwell. I knew something wasn't right, so I went to the hospital. Tests were run, but nothing came back conclusive. My friend and neighbour, who happens to be a physician, stopped by to see how I was doing after the hospital visit. I remember her saying, "Worst case scenario, it is *C. diff*, but hopefully it isn't." I had never heard of *C. diff*, but her ominous words rang true the following week.

I continued to get sicker and sicker as the days went on. Between high fevers and chills, I began to hallucinate. I went back to the hospital and was finally diagnosed with *C. diff*. I was put into home isolation. I had arrived on my first desert island. I was prescribed antibiotics. Ironically, these antibiotics were prescribed to fight the infection that flourished as a result of taking the first antibiotics.

Within 48 hours, the drugs worked, and each day, I began to improve. However, a week after I had finished the antibiotics, the *C. diff* came back with a vengeance. I was immediately given a prescription for more antibiotics. I went downhill very quickly this time. I ended up in the ER on a cold and snowy March night to be rehydrated and reassessed for my medication. It was supposed to be a quick trip, and I figured I would be home in no time to feed my newborn baby. In the hospital ER, my health rapidly deteriorated as my kidneys

began to fail. I floated in and out of consciousness. At some time during that night, I was wheeled to another floor. I woke up in a cold, sterile room, hooked up to machines, completely alone. A young nurse entered my room, wearing full protective gear, and informed me that I was now in medical isolation. A note adorned the door with the menacing word: ISOLATION. Now my island had moved to the hospital. To come onto my new island, the dress code was simple: personal protective equipment (PPE). This meant anyone entering my room needed be fully decked out in a gown, head covering, gloves, face mask, and booties over their footwear.

There are three words that best describe my island experience: lonely, scared, and helpless. Not only was I separated by the physical barriers, I felt emotionally alone. No one could touch me except for the physicians and nurses who poked and prodded me, dressed in their PPE. No one could hold me. More importantly, my husband and my boys (including my newborn) were not even allowed onto the island for fear that they could become infected. I was scared that I was going to die. Despite the drugs I was on, I wasn't getting better. At times, I was in so much pain, I felt like death would be a welcomed embrace. I was scared of being alone. I couldn't get out of bed on my own. I couldn't feed or bathe myself. I was completely dependent on the incredible nurses, and hospital staff, for everything. This is when I realized the most important lesson from this isolation: I was not alone, and I would never be alone.

My experience of isolation became the foundation for my understanding of those many people who have been isolated due to COVID-19. In the early days of the pandemic, it was not difficult for me, for example, to imagine what it felt like to be hooked up to a ventilator, feeling alone, cut off from family members who were worried that the virus would take their loved one, and yet I felt helpless because there was nothing I could do to help carry the burden that so many were feeling. So, like many others, I thanked healthcare workers and other front-line workers for their service to the community by putting signs in my front yard and occasionally buying dinners for those people close to me who were working on the front lines. While my intentions were genuine, I can't help but think that my actions were more about me than supporting the other.

Addressing this new reality, Pope Francis's Holy Week message was entitled "Creativity of Love Can Overcome Isolation." He proclaimed, "Let us look out for the loneliest people, perhaps by telephone or social networks; let us pray to the Lord for those who are in difficulty in Italy and in the world. Even if we are isolated, thought and spirit can go far with the creativity of love. This is what we need today: the creativity of love."

Despite the fact that lockdown directives have been lifting around the world, we continue to grapple with the fear around the second wave of COVID-19 and the return of isolation measures. Again, we are forced to confront, and perhaps experience, isolation. This time we all have hindsight. This time we know we don't have to do it alone. In his first public gathering at the Vatican following the lockdown in Italy on June 20, 2020, Pope Francis addressed the doctors, nurses, and healthcare workers from the Lombardy region of Italy.<sup>2</sup> Lombardy was one of the hardest-hit areas in Italy. Almost 93,000 residents contracted the virus, and 16,570 died. In his words of encouragement, Pope Francis said:

... we can emerge from this crisis spiritually and morally stronger; and that depends on the conscience and responsibility of each one of us. Not alone, however, but together and with the grace of God. As believers it is up to us to witness that God does not abandon us, but in Christ he gives meaning even to this reality and to our limitations; that with his help we can face the most difficult trials. God created us for communion, for fraternity, and now more than ever the pretension of being wholly focused upon oneself—of making individualism the guiding principle of society—has proved illusory—it is illusory.

For me, it took an experience of isolation, when I was vulnerable and completely reliant on others, for my illusions of strength and independence to be exposed. There is no shame in coming to this realization that we need one another but, rather, a renewed sense of freedom.

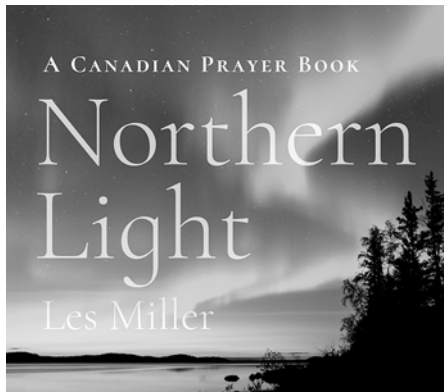
Even at this time of COVID-19, when all of us are experiencing some sense of vulnerability, there is a presence of community support around us. Let us be thankful for those essential workers who strive to maintain a sense of normalcy within our communities. Let us support organizations in our communities that care for the poor, the elderly, the homeless, and other vulnerable people. And let us actively work together in solidarity to overcome structures of injustice that alienate the most vulnerable among us. By supporting one another, we take collective action against the forces that try to tell us that individualism should be the guiding force of society.

**Megan Shore** is an associate professor at King's University College, London, Ontario.

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1 Pope Francis' Holy Week 2020 Message: "Creativity of love can overcome isolation," <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-04/pope-francis-holy-week-2020-message-coronavirus.html>. Accessed Sept. 18, 2020.

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