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## Theology in a Time of Plague

**Abstract (English) – Theology in a Time of Plague.** The Covid-19 pandemic offers numerous challenges for theological reflection. This paper focusses on three areas – pastoral theology, liturgy and Catholic Social Teaching – concentrating on the life of the Catholic Church in Britain. What have the challenges been, and how far has the response of the churches been theologically informed? The core questions the paper addresses is how far the Church can combine and balance the demands of pastoral care, the celebration of public worship and a prophetic witness in society for justice and truthfulness. In the first instance, has there been an adequate and theological pastoral response to people’s needs? Have our Church communities acted in a loving way, particularly for those who have been particularly vulnerable? Second, has our public worship, constrained in unprecedented ways, reflected good liturgical theology, both when churches were completely closed to the public and in the period since public worship has been permitted again? Finally, has the Church been faithful to the principles and application of Catholic Social Teaching in our public response to issues raised during the pandemic? Has this response reflected the prophetic tradition in the Scriptures? In conclusion the paper reflects on the need for lamentation, both during and after the pandemic, for the thousands of victims of the virus.

*Keywords: Covid-19, Catholic Social Teaching, Liturgy, Pastoral Theology, Lamentation*

**Abstract (Français) – La théologie à l’heure de la peste.** La pandémie de Covid-19 pose de nombreux défis à la réflexion théologique. Le présent article est centré sur trois domaines – la théologie pastorale, la liturgie et l’enseignement social catholique – appliqués à la vie de l’Église catholique en Grande-Bretagne. Quels ont été les défis, et dans quelle mesure la réponse des églises a-t-elle été théologiquement éclairée ? Dans quelle mesure l’Église peut-elle combiner et équilibrer les exigences de la pastorale, de la célébration du culte public et d’un témoignage prophétique dans la société pour la justice et la vérité ? Telle est la question centrale de l’article. En premier lieu, y a-t-il eu une réponse pastorale adéquate et théologique aux besoins des gens ? Nos communautés ecclésiales ont-elles agi avec amour, en particulier pour ceux qui étaient particulièrement vulnérables ? Ensuite, notre culte public, contraint de manière inédite, a-t-il reflété une bonne théologie liturgique, à la fois lorsque les églises étaient complètement fermées au public et depuis que le culte public a été à nouveau autorisé ? Enfin, l’Église a-t-elle été fidèle aux principes et à l’application de la doctrine

sociale catholique dans notre réponse publique aux questions soulevées pendant la pandémie ? Cette réponse a-t-elle reflété la tradition prophétique des Écritures ? En conclusion, l'article fait réfléchir à la nécessité d'une lamentation, pendant et après la pandémie, pour les milliers de victimes du virus.

**Abstract (Deutsch) – Die Theologie in den Zeiten der Seuche.** Die Covid-19-Pandemie bietet zahlreiche Herausforderungen für die theologische Reflexion. Dieser Beitrag nimmt drei Bereiche in den Blick – Pastoraltheologie, Liturgie und Katholische Soziallehre – und konzentriert sich dabei auf das Leben der katholischen Kirche in Großbritannien. Worin bestanden die Herausforderungen, und inwieweit war die Reaktion der Kirchen theologisch fundiert? Die Kernfrage, mit der sich der Artikel befasst, ist, inwieweit die Kirche die Anforderungen der Seelsorge, der Feier des öffentlichen Gottesdienstes und eines prophetischen Zeugnisses in der Gesellschaft für Gerechtigkeit und Wahrhaftigkeit miteinander verbinden und in Balance halten kann. Hat es in erster Linie eine angemessene und theologische pastorale Antwort auf die Bedürfnisse der Menschen gegeben? Haben unsere Kirchengemeinden in einer liebenden Weise gehandelt, insbesondere für diejenigen, die besonders verletzlich waren? Zweitens: Hat unser öffentlicher Gottesdienst, der in noch nie dagewesener Weise eingeschränkt wurde, eine gute liturgische Theologie widergespiegelt, sowohl als die Kirchen für die Öffentlichkeit völlig geschlossen waren als auch in der Zeit, seit der öffentliche Gottesdienst wieder erlaubt ist? Und schließlich: Ist die Kirche in ihrer öffentlichen Reaktion auf die während der Pandemie aufgeworfenen Fragen den Prinzipien und der Anwendung der katholischen Soziallehre treu geblieben? Hat diese Antwort die prophetische Tradition der Heiligen Schrift widergespiegelt? Abschließend reflektiert der Artikel über die Notwendigkeit der Klage, sowohl während als auch nach der Pandemie, um die Tausenden von Opfern des Virus.

## 1. Introduction

The title of Gabriel Garcia Marquez' 1985 novel *Love in a Time of Cholera* has often been parodied. For Christians reading the “signs of the times” should be a priority. For many of us this may be the most challenging time we have ever faced in our lives. As a theologian and priest working in London, I will look at theological realities under three headings.

## 2. Pastoral Theology of sickness in Covid-19

The General Introduction to *Pastoral Care of the Sick* begins with these rather daunting words: “Suffering and illness have always been among the greatest problems that trouble the human spirit. Christians feel and experience pain as

do all other people; yet their faith helps them to grasp more deeply the mystery of suffering and to bear their pain with greater courage. From Christ's words they know that sickness has meaning and value for their own salvation and for the salvation of the world. They also know that Christ, who during his life often visited and healed the sick, loves them in their illness." (1983, 10)

Lent last year was marked by an extraordinary phenomenon, not long after it begun. Churches were required by law to close their doors – public worship of any kind in these buildings had to cease. The speed with which this happened caught many off guard. How could parishes maintain contact with their members, particularly the most vulnerable? Ways of doing this were brought into being effectively in some places; elsewhere it did not happen at all; perhaps in most places people did a reasonable job, not brilliant but not too bad. Many priests and deacons are over 70; their own freedom of movement was limited. Ordinary pastoral ministry to the sick was almost overnight severely limited. We were told that taking Holy Communion to the sick was no longer allowed; and anointing the sick and dying, particularly if they had Covid-19, was highly restricted, if allowed at all. Anointing with oil of the forehead and hands of the sick person had to be done not with the thumb, relishing human touch, but with a tool probably unknown to many priests, a "cotton bud". Some of these restrictions have been unprecedented: how can we make a reality of our liturgical theological vision?

There have also been frequent changes in regulations about numbers of people.<sup>1</sup> We have had to helping people anew to "grasp more deeply the mystery of human suffering and to bear their pain with greater courage"; we have had to seek people out, often remotely; often we have not been told of people's sufferings. Those who are elderly, vulnerable, isolated and frightened can easily turn in on themselves, wary of seeking help, perhaps fearful that clergy or other visitors might be put at risk.

Many of the rules have been laid down by governments. But also from an ethical standpoint following the rules is really about being considerate and thoughtful to other worshippers. Resistance to wearing masks in church or elsewhere is certainly grounded in selfishness (unless there are medical reasons) and some of us in pastoral ministry have had to point this out.

The pandemic has brought the reality of serious illness and death closer to many than in the past, and we should take the opportunity to reflect on our theology of sickness and suffering. To put it bluntly, we do not panic in the face of these things. Much of modern culture, where people are used to overcoming

<sup>1</sup> So for much of the summer 30 people were allowed at baptisms; then it was abruptly cut to 6 in the autumn. While this coincided with the "second wave" no one was told why these particular celebrations were suddenly unsafe.

problems and where even in healthcare there is often a reluctance to admit failure and the reality of mortality, is being challenged by the pandemic, especially in the most technologically advanced and wealthy countries. In the face of nature humanity is not all-powerful. The ways in which people have cared for others have helped us rediscover afresh the theological concept of virtue. Dedicated nurses and care home workers, for example, have supported the sick and the needy so well because it is “how they are”, often with a strong sense of vocation. Such people behave well, they do good, in the midst of a crisis. But a lot has been difficult.

In spite of all that has happened in relation to the abuse of the vulnerable, it is still true that *physical contact* is often valuable in pastoral ministry. Giving someone a hug, or simply holding a person’s hand, show great warmth and love. Suddenly this was forbidden. Even when public worship in churches was permitted again from early July, we were told not to talk to each other outside church after Mass; much sharing of community life was expected to end. People were expected to scurry away from Mass, almost guiltily.

What does this mean for pastoral ministry? In many parishes clergy and lay-people have formed teams who have gone out of their way to engage with people whom they know, particularly the elderly and housebound. This means ringing up, as many in this group are not online. Parishes have tried to meet people in the midst of need, listening to the pain from the fear of sickness and dying, fear of unemployment, fears about children and parents, anxiety about young people at university, anger at the mismanagement of the crisis.

In Lent and Eastertide last year we hoped that by the autumn things would be getting better, not expecting that the whole of Europe would be re-entering the most severe restrictions. Many are simply weary, often not having had proper holidays. Maintaining a sense of solidarity and mutual care gets harder as time goes on, exacerbated by a growing sense of cynicism and disillusionment with the political leadership of the country.

### 3. Liturgy and worship

Just as Vatican II’s constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, was one of the first council documents to be promulgated, so theological reflection about worship in this time should be central. One of that document’s themes is the importance of “active participation”. The Church in the last sixty years has tried to extend and deepen participation in the liturgy by all those in the worshipping assembly: where does that leave us now? Last March it became impossible for most people to come to church; the celebration of Mass and other acts of worship was restricted to the clergy, and many churches which had

not already been broadcasting their services by livestreaming methods learnt to do so. It looked as if overnight the achievements of the last sixty years were swept away, and many who tried to participate remotely, particularly women, keenly felt this. Some of these negative reactions have been reflected in articles in the Catholic press, on social media and in Webinars organised by theologians and others.<sup>2</sup>

The Church's pastors should listen to these voices, alongside concerns, particularly early on, about technological and practical issues. At the same time these celebrations, for all their flaws, have been a lifeline for many people. The sheer number of people joining Masses online from all over the world has been astounding. We should not dismiss this positive appraisal; many clergy and others have worked hard to relay worship in this way. Perhaps we can learn something about diversity in the Church and the need for consideration and tolerance. Moreover the pilgrim People of God has learnt to look around. Many, in addition to connecting to Mass in their home parish, or instead of doing so, have been able to join Mass from all over the world. In particular for many this was true for celebrations led by Pope Francis; another example in England and Wales was the pattern of Thursday evening Masses for healthcare workers celebrated by a different bishop each week from his cathedral. There is a real tension: on the one hand, a person or a family joining a Mass at home are on their own; yet they can also be more engaged with the Church outside their own community.

Similar issues about active participation arose when churches reopened from July for worship. The experience of the Mass somewhat strange for laypeople and clergy. Social distancing rules, the wearing of masks, the exhortation that Mass should not last too long, the suspension of Bidding Prayers, the Sign of Peace, Holy Communion from the chalice and most forms of live singing. All these happen to be aspects of liturgy which have become important since the Second Vatican Council. At times the celebration of Mass feels rather bleak: but perhaps, amid the suffering and death, that is appropriate. Churches should be not settings for enforced jollity.

While these steps have been necessary sometimes priests have chosen not to involve *anyone else* in the celebration actively, even though this is not required: so they proclaim all the readings, even if there are others who can read. This is bad liturgy.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. webinars organised by the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain, accessible via [https:// www.facebook.com/groups/1688760937929335/](https://www.facebook.com/groups/1688760937929335/).

#### 4. Catholic Social Teaching and Covid-19

*Gaudium et Spes* teaches: “Let everyone consider it a sacred obligation to esteem and observe social necessities as belonging to the primary duties of modern humanity. For the more unified the world becomes, the more plainly do the duties of men and women extend beyond particular groups and spread by degrees to the whole world. But this development cannot occur unless individual men and women and their associations cultivate in themselves the moral and social virtues, and promote them in society [...]” (section 30)

Just as we try to apply the concept of virtue to pastoral care, so we should make a theological appraisal of what has been happening in the light of “moral and social virtues,” hand in hand with the ways in which we offer pastoral care and liturgical worship. So the Catholic Bishops Conference of England and Wales has led the way by drawing attention to particular social issues, such as the needs of prisoners and migrants.<sup>3</sup> Like Pope Francis, bishops have called on political leaders to create a better society. But we need to do more than that. If we are to be true prophets we need for us to proclaim God’s judgment, pointing out where things have gone very wrong. Consider these words of a fictional Jesuit priest preaching during a plague: “Thus from the dawn of recorded history the scourge of God has humbled the proud of heart and laid low those who hardened themselves against Him. Ponder this well, my friends, and fall on your knees.” (Camus 1947, 91)

The Church has often responded to plagues with a call to repentance; although often crude, this should not be lost at the moment, for some have behaved badly. The Church should be among those holding public authorities to account. By and large we have become more confident in doing this, for two reasons: first the UK government has lost a great deal of public confidence, for good reasons; secondly the churches have worked hard to ensure that places of worship are safe. The principle that we all have to make sacrifices to safeguard others’ health is virtuous: Christianity has no sympathy with those who have protested against restrictions, denied the reality of the crisis or opposed vaccinations.

With regard to healthcare resource allocation social teaching insists on the primacy of patient care; we also assert the preferential option for the poor.<sup>4</sup> At

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cbcew.org.uk/home/news-and-media/news/> gives the range of issues which have been addressed since March 2020.

<sup>4</sup> At the beginning of the crisis the failure of many national policies with regard to healthcare reflected underfunding, the effects in the NHS of constant reorganisations, outsourcing to private companies and the adoption of free market policies. See Gately /Beck /Jones 2011 and McCoy 2020. For ethical discussions of the NHS response see also the posts in the *Catholic Social Thought* blog, <https://catholicsocialthought.org.uk/>.

the height of the crisis in the spring of 2020 there were serious concerns. In the UK there is a moral issue which is never far away – *Brexit*, the ugly word for the ugly process by which the UK has left the European Union. At the very beginning of the pandemic crisis, following the December 2019 General Election, some thought that this issue would finally recede. That was never going to happen, but the pandemic has made it more critical than ever, for two reasons.

The first is to do with the future of the UK economy: social teaching sees economic policy as important, determining people's employment. The economy is already suffering, and this will impede any recovery after the pandemic. While all European economies face big challenges arising from Covid-19, these will be much more serious in the UK because of *Brexit*. How can the indifference and deceit which characterises the Johnson government square with the Church's vision, among other texts articulated in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*?

We will face big challenges as we try to support the victims of this reckless step: those who do not care about suffering which will result from business closures, monetary instability and widespread unemployment are morally culpable.

The second reason is the way in which *Brexit* and the mind-set behind have affected the UK's response, particularly at the beginning of 2020.<sup>5</sup> Countries need to cooperate in the face of this crisis, by coordinating measures, learning from each other (since the virus has arrived in different countries at different times) research aimed at finding a vaccine, and the distribution and administration of vaccines. In Europe the first country to be affected by Covid-19 was Italy: like other countries the UK had an opportunity to "get ahead of the game" and act quickly with restrictive measures; but it failed, losing crucial weeks. Similarly supplies of personal protective equipment and ventilators; lives were lost because of this ineptitude which stemmed from the Johnson government's hostility to Europe. The policies behind these mistakes are challenged by Catholic teaching. The Pontifical Academy for Life issued a powerful document last March, with this call: "Politically, the current situation urges us to take a broad view. In international relations (and in the relations among the Members of the European Union) it is a short-sighted and illusory logic that seeks to give answers in terms of 'national interests.' Without effective cooperation and effective coordination, which addresses the inevitable political, commercial, ideological and relational resistances firmly, viruses do not stop. Of course, these are very serious and burdensome decisions: we need an open vision and choices that do not always satisfy the immediate desires of individual populations. But given the markedly global current dynamic, our responses, to be effective, cannot be

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this see Beck 2020.

limited to what happens within one's own borders." (Pontifical Academy for Life 2020)

Some outside the Catholic Church can discern these problems clearly. The English journalist and economist Will Hutton, who in his books has often stressed the importance of Catholic Social teaching, has written about how badly so many European and North American countries, and the UK in particular, have coped with Covid-19, compared to eastern "communitarian" societies. Just as people who are virtuous behave better in a time of crisis, so societies where there is a strong sense of community and solidarity have reacted much better to the pandemic.<sup>6</sup>

In the weekday Mass lectionary for the whole of July and much of August we heard daily extracts from the prophets.<sup>7</sup> This was fortuitous: social teaching, and particularly our obligation to stand by the *anawim* and to call to account the rulers of this world, has to be nurtured by this tradition. The first extract, heard at the end of June, was from Amos: "See how I am going to crush you to the ground as the threshing-sledge crushes when clogged by straw; flight will not save even the swift, the strong man will find his strength useless, the mighty man will be powerless to save himself." (2:13-15)

This is not unlike the message of Father Paneloux in *La Peste*. While some national leaders have acted well in this pandemic, some very powerful men are being humbled. The Church, should not be afraid to say this, especially as in England and Wales the pandemic has coincided by chance with a special *Year of the Word*, designed to help Catholics know the Bible better. A real danger is that we neglect this tradition when called on, as the prophets were, to foster illusory national unity, to cry "peace, peace" when there is no peace. Someone who sees this clearly is Pope Francis, and his new encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, is a major contribution to Catholic Social teaching, reflecting much of his preaching and catechesis during the pandemic. The letter merits fuller reflection than is possible here, but those of us who have criticised right-wing governments have been vindicated (cf. FT 141). Condemnation of populist nationalism is a running theme; significantly for those of us enduring *Brexit* the pope goes out of his way early in the text to commend the founders of the European Union and to see the abandonment of their vision as one the "dark clouds over a closed world" (FT 10).

<sup>6</sup> "The big lesson from Asia is that communitarian, more equal societies have the social capital and mutual support to allow curfews, self-isolation, quarantining and social distancing to work, even for the poorest. [...] Western societies have failed the deadly Covid test. They must learn lessons from Asia." (Hutton 2020)

<sup>7</sup> Weeks 13 to 20 (year II), covering parts of Amos, Hosea, Nahum, Habakkuk, Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

Challenges to the ways in which some governments have responded to this pandemic draw to some extent on the Church's teaching authority. We need to realise that this authority has been gravely compromised in many European countries – and certainly the UK – by grave failures in relation to the abuse of children. The damage resulting from this will not go away in the near future, and we need to acknowledge this with penitence and humility.

## 5. Conclusion: “Blessed are you who weep”

Returning to last year's weekday Mass readings, before the sequence from the prophets began, after the narrative from 2 Kings describing the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, we heard at the end of June from the second chapter of the book of Lamentations: “Cry aloud, then, to the Lord, groan, daughter of Zion; let your tears flow like a torrent, day and night; give yourself no relief, grant your eyes no rest. Up, cry out in the night-time, in the early hours of darkness.” (2: 18-19)

A criticism sometimes made of the contemporary Holy Week liturgies is that they have lost much of the element of lamentation which rather dominated the rites earlier on, emphasising instead the triumph of the crucifixion. The office of *Tenebrae*, seldom celebrated, is what people perhaps miss. This is dominated by Lamentations, and through its gloom offers worshippers a chance to lament. Because funeral services have been so restricted, many people have not been able to lament the often lonely deaths of their loved ones. We need space to lament the ways in which communities have been impoverished in so many ways, particularly in relation to artistic and cultural life – and some of what has gone may not return. While I realise all the good that has been done by virtuous people, we need to face and acknowledge our grief.

In terms of worship care will be needed to meet this human need for lamentation. Masses for the dead are important, and we should ensure that they are celebrated well, but other acts of worship will be helpful as well. They should involve people or groups who have not been able to participate actively in public worship.

Pastoral care, the Church's liturgy and Catholic Social teaching all offer hope in the face of the last few months, hope grounded in faith. Perhaps if we want to find some hope we can return to Camus:

“This light, too, illuminates the shadowed paths that lead towards deliverance. It reveals the will of God in action, unfailingly transforming evil into good. And once again today it is leading us through the dark valley of fears and groans towards the holy silence, the wellspring of all life.” (Camus 1947, 94)

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