

TO ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS!  
TO SEEK THE ENLIGHTENED ANSWERS!  
Challenges During this Pandemic and Beyond  
(Into the Post-COVID19 Era)

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First the good news. Until the total lockdown gave way to general and even moderate community quarantine status, the sky was bluer, we had fresher air to breath, rivers and seas were less polluted (some reports indicated that schools of fish could be seen in locations such as the Pasig River to the canals of Venice) and nature had a break from humanity's continuing abuse. How about the bad news? Very bad, indeed.

There seems to be no end to the pandemic as there is no sign that the elusive vaccine to combat COVID-19 could be discovered in the short-term. The cabal of the most respected scientists in the various fields studying the incidence, distribution and possible control of the virus – from the epidemiologists to the virologists in the most prestigious centers ranging from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the Chinese Medical Association, the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control, the Oxford and other universities et al – do not share the same prognosis. Some are hopeful the vaccine might be out already before the end of the year. Others say it may still take many more years. And there are a few who posit that there will never be a vaccine; and on top of that – another type of corona virus may even evolve.

Already the COVID-19 figures are staggering! Globally, as of the figures released on 17 June 2021, total infections have gone up to 7,940,000. This can reach 8 million soon, as there are still countries experiencing increased numbers. Total deaths have gone up to 435,000, almost reaching half-a-million. Where a few weeks ago, the US, China, Italy and Spain were the countries worst hit, these days, it is still the US, but the next highest infected countries are Brazil, Russia and India. While the Philippines may not be at the top of the list of the worst hit countries, still our numbers continue to rise. As of 17 June, there have been 267,238 infections with only 6,820 who have recovered and 1,108 deaths.

These are very disturbing numbers and all of us should cringe even to think of the impact of all these figures and what this reality has meant to those who have died, have gotten sick and for the medical personnel who have been at taking extreme risks doing their duties. In fact, that the big number of frontliners who have succumbed to the disease is tragic! And yet, humanity across the globe has grown numb with these figures.

A kind of “numbers fatigue” has crept into our consciousness. Their shock effect has dissipated as many of us do not care anymore in monitoring the numbers, as we all

desire the end of any form of lockdown. The impact of the virus on our economic situation – especially for those who can only put food on their table if they manage to get out to have a job on a daily basis – has made us pragmatic and not too worried about being infected.

I have been the chronicler for our community's daily log-book and I record significant events taking place on a daily basis. The first entry I wrote mentioning the spread of COVID-19 was on February 29 when we Redemptorists were gathered together for an assembly in our retreat house in Cebu City. A confrere assigned in South Korea was arriving to join us, and somebody joked that as South Korea was reported to already have infections, he might be carrying the virus. But even then we didn't think this virus would spread in the way it would be creating the pandemic we have witnessed so far.

But it was not until two weeks later that signs were clear that something scary was arising. On 13 March, I recorded the figures that was now available online: Total global infections – 124,519, total deaths – 4,607. These kind of figures caused much anxiety and it dawned on most of us that COVID-19 was going to be worst than what we initially expected. This, as we began to feel the inconveniences of being lockdowned.

And yet, compared these numbers to the 11,586,784 and 537,372 figures of infections and deaths as of July 6, 2020, and there is no question – God/Allah forbid! (As we say in Cebuano – *simbako!*) – that this pandemic is going the way of the figures of fatalities of the bubonic plague, the Spanish flu, the two World Wars and the Korean and Vietnam wars.

So facing the bad news what are we to do? There are always a variety of responses depending on the persons' mindset, level of critical awareness, ideological standpoints, religious beliefs, cultural backgrounds and personality traits. But methinks the most pragmatic response is – to ask the right questions and to seek enlightened answers. We cannot anymore pretend that we can return to how life was before the pandemic arose.

We cannot assume that as we slowly cut down on the restrictions – except the wearing of facemasks, social/physical distancing and healthy habits – it would be “business as usual.” Even if there will be a vaccine that might end the pandemic, no way we can ignore the demands of a “new normal.” Whether we like it not, the world has changed, and if we want to survive the new challenges facing us, we will need to be smart enough to learn how to be creative and resilient.

Hopefully the few months we were forced to stay at home provided us time for retrospection and discernment. Perhaps we did have some new insights into human life and the radical changes demanded of us in terms of prioritizing what are the essentials in our lives, to cut down on the non-essentials which only congest our surroundings, live healthy lifestyles, deepen personal relationships, enjoy the delights that this world

can offer while making sure to sustain its ecological integrity and nourish the sources of our well-being whether it is a belief system or cultural undertakings! But as we engage in this kind of interaction with Mother Earth and with the people who interface with our lives, we do need to ask the relevant questions, and hopefully find the right answers we seek.

So here's to our questions and quests that could help open a new vista of living a life that empowers us to survive with grace and fortitude - come what may!