**Rediscovering Solidarity During a Global Pandemic**

**Jem Sullivan, Ph.D.**

Our shared experience of the 2020 global pandemic will not be forgotten easily. “Could this really be happening?” was the widespread question, spoken or unspoken, in minds and hearts everywhere as the rapid spread of COVID-19 brought daily routines to a jarring halt. In its trail, the virus has left unprecedented fear, uncertainty, hardship, suffering, and death. The most creative novelists and film makers could not have imagined how an unseen, lethal virus could unleash, so rapidly, its devastating effects on the world.

As an Asian Indian educator who has accompanied young adults in Catholic graduate, seminary, undergraduate and high schools for over twenty years, I have been inspired by the witness of Asian and Pacific Islander communities struggling through this global pandemic. These communities have persevered through the pandemic as missionary disciples of Jesus Christ.

While the virus spread, we saw and heard what our minds could not understand. At one time or another we have all felt a sense of helplessness, fear of the present, and anxiety about the future. We have each, in our own way, sensed the full weight of our frail human condition. Every cultural community has experienced the spiritual consequences of being deprived of access to sacred spaces and sacramental celebrations. Even as we look cautiously for signs of return to normalcy the definition of “normal” life changes from day to day. It took an unknown virus to teach us that even in forced social isolation we are social beings whose lives unfold in a tightly woven web of interconnected relationships.

As the deadly virus weakened the world, simultaneously the resilience of the human spirit strengthened and spread far and wide. When national lockdowns and social distancing became the norm of human interaction, the innate kindness and spontaneous compassion that lies within us surfaced. Families, friends, and neighbors were drawn together in concern for the elderly and vulnerable, and communities demonstrated self-sacrifice for the sake of the common good.

Take Catherine who is of Korean descent. A graduate theology student who works a full-time job and serves as a volunteer catechist with second and third graders in her close-knit Korean Catholic community. This spring, as the pandemic began to isolate cities around the world, she learned that her elderly mother’s health had deteriorated. Fighting through the challenges of travel restrictions and not knowing if she would be able to return to her studies and faith community in the US, Catherine made the long journey home to Korea to be at her mother’s side. A few months later her mother passed away peacefully among friends and family. In a note she wrote to me some weeks later, Catherine expressed both sadness at the loss of her mother and deep gratitude for the gift of faith and family that sustained her as the pandemic raged all around. She could not have overcome her fears and the risks of international travel at the height of the pandemic without the strength of her Catholic faith, she noted. Being a missionary disciple of Jesus strengthened her to witness, to trust in God, and to live self-sacrificial love of family.

Or take the example of Sister Maria, a Pacific Islander who served as diocesan director for ethnic ministries in a west coast diocese. As weekly parish collections dwindled during the lockdown, she was informed that a necessary restructuring of the diocese, due to lack of funds, meant that the ethnic ministries office would be phased out! At the very moment when the pastoral and spiritual needs of the faithful increased during the pandemic, its financial consequences made ministries, like hers, impossible to support. Sister Maria now looks for other ways to continue her pastoral presence to the communities she once served with dedication.

Asian and Pacific Island Catholic families consist often of several generations living under one roof or living or in proximity to one another. Maintaining close family connections and intergenerational dialogue offers opportunities for younger generations to appropriate and live their Catholic faith together with adults who are role models and witnesses to lived faith that transforms culture. Two movements within the Asian and Pacific Island Catholic communities stand out as examples of the culture transforming power of faith and family during the pandemic, the Vietnamese Eucharistic Youth Movement and the Filipino movement, Youth for Christ. In the midst of lockdowns that made physical gatherings impossible, these Asian and Pacific Island ecclesial movements continue to grow in solidarity and mutual support through virtual gatherings and social media platforms.

During the pandemic Asian Catholics have rediscovered the transformative power of solidarity and faith as a force for cultural change, as Pope Francis noted in his *Extraordinary Urbi et Orbi* message to a pandemic-stricken world:

The Lord asks us and, in the midst of our tempest, invites us to reawaken and put into practice that solidarity and hope capable of giving strength, support and meaning to these hours when everything seems to be floundering…In the midst of isolation when we are suffering from a lack of tenderness and chances to meet up, and we experience the loss of so many things, let us once again listen to the proclamation that saves us: He is risen and is living by our side.[[1]](#endnote-1)

***Dr. Jem Sullivan*** *is an educator and author who serves as professor of Catechetics in the School of Theology and Religious Studies at The Catholic University of America, Washington, DC.*

(Note:to protect the identity of persons all names in this article are fictional).

1. Pope Francis, *Extraordinary Urbi et Orbi message*, 27 March 2020, accessed at <http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200327_omelia-epidemia.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)