

Association of Moral Theologians of India (AMTI)

30th Annual Conference (Online)

COVID-19: ETHICAL CHALLENGES

15, 22, 29 October 2020

The 30th annual conference and meeting of the Association of Moral Theologians of India (AMTI) was conducted on 15, 22 and 29 October 2020. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, the conference was held online. Besides the members of AMTI, a few theologians and theology students from various countries also participated in the conference. All together more than 145 people registered for the conference.

Welcoming the participants, **Augustine Kallely**, the secretary of AMTI highlighted the importance of reflecting on the Covid-19 pandemic and responding to the crisis in light of our faith. Besides the inaugural address and presidential address, three papers were presented each day, followed by lively discussion. Francis Chittuparambil, Dr Rahul Sima (St Martha's Hospital, Bangalore), Scaria Kanniyakonil, Paulachan Kochappilly, Mary Mee-Yin Yuen (Hong-Kong), Amirtham Metti, Stanley Sahayaraj, Prem Xalxo and James F. Keenan (Boston College) presented papers. Each day, the session started with sharing on Covid-19 experience by a few participants. The sharing included the following points: "How Covid-19 has affected the life of people in your locality/state/country; How it has affected in particular the life of the poor, the aged, women and children; Has anyone in your institution/community been affected, and how you have faced it and overcome it; How the healthcare system in your place/government agencies has been responding to the situation; How you or your institution has been responding to this healthcare and social crisis; How the Church has been responding."

Inaugurating the conference on 15 October 2020, **Bishop Stephen Chirappanath** (Apostolic Visitator for the Syro-Malabar Faithful in Europe & Procurator of the Syro-Malabar Church at the Holy See) said that, "Like every evil whether physical or moral, evil of corona also raises an immense question, an enigma impossible to resolve, at least in the immediate future," and pointed that prayer is our strongest and surest response to evil. Referring to Pope Francis, he told that "Once more we realized that no one is saved alone; we can only be saved together." The present pandemic also reminds us that there are no differences or borders between those who suffer. We are all frail, all equal, all precious, and hence it is an opportunity to think about our collective future. Bishop Stephen also underscored that, "It is an opportunity to remember that we are brothers and sisters all, with the one loving God as our Father."

In the Presidential Address, **Shaji George Kochuthara** said that besides being a health/healthcare crisis, Covid-19 is also a social crisis. On the one hand people have faced it heroically. Covid-19 can affect anyone, but its impact on the poor and the marginalized is more severe. The ugly face of inequality has become more visible with COVID-19. It has also its impact on the family, on children and women. He told that, even in the midst of this suffering,

we also have to appreciate the selfless and heroic service of healthcare workers, many public servants and NGOs. The Church has been realistic in its response, but there are observations that the Church should have played a more proactive role. Kochuthara highlighted some of the theological challenges that Covid-19 poses: developing a theology and spirituality that makes lay people mature and independent in their spiritual life; a Family-centred, People-centred theology; to strengthen our social commitment; to engage the public square more effectively; theology of Suffering, theology of Hope, etc.

Papers on the first day, 15 October 2020, were on “Covid-19: Bioethical Perspectives.” **Francis Chittuparambil**, in his paper “Covid-19 and Healthcare issues; Care of the Aged, Equity in the Distribution of Healthcare Facilities, etc.,” analysed two crucial issues that emerged during the time of pandemic Covid-19, namely, the care of the aged and the just allocation of scarce medical resources for the victims of Covid-19. According to Chittuparambil, as in the parable of the Good Samaritan, the health care personnel often take care of the unknown and often elderly persons. In the allocation of scarce medical resources, the principles of justice and equity are important where priority is to be given to those in urgent need, irrespective of the provenience or influence. The predominant criteria are proportionality and triage – assignment of degree of urgency to decide the order of treatment. Reflecting on “Covid-19 and Challenges to Medical Research,” **Dr Rahul Sima**, a Surgeon and Physician of St Martha’s Hospital, Bangalore, explained the medical aspects of Covid-19, especially the challenges involved in the medical care of those infected and in the research to find effective therapies and vaccine. Rationing of resources in the time of pandemic whether it is of ICU beds and ventilators to even getting a hospital bed, scarcity has brought to the forefront some fundamental values to be addressed. Covid-19 has also affected medical research unrelated to Covid-19, since the availability of medical personnel, and due to restrictions and change of conditions by sponsors. Data is very important in the research in Covid-19. In the Indian scenario the vast majority of data we have is from urban cities and hospitals and not much on the situation in the rural areas. Besides, the reliability of the data is also a question. Rahul Sima underscored the importance of including representative populations in Covid-19 studies. “Trials in critically ill COVID-19 patients are likely to be conducted only in private hospitals thus depriving the socioeconomically disadvantaged.” He also pointed out that one of the main concerns about a vaccine is the need for public confidence in its safety and efficacy. **Scaria Kanniyakonil** presented the paper on “Prevention and Detection of Corona Virus with Biochip Implants: An Ethical Evaluation.” He pointed out that many companies and institutes are therefore interested in developing effective methods for the rapid detection of SARS-CoV-2. In this context, the US Department of Defence (DARPA), the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in contract with Silicon Valley Company developed a biochip to detect COVID in the general population before its symptoms begin by analysing the body temperature variations and antibody status. Kanniyakonil highlighted some of the ethical issues involved: The question of safety or risk factors, misuse of the collected data by a totalitarian government, common good, informed consent, breach of privacy and autonomy, and issues related to social justice are impeding ethical questions that need to be answered.

Day 2, 22 October 2020 focused on “Covid-19 and Its Impact on Migrants, as well as on Gender Perspectives.” **Paulachan Kochappilly**, addressing “Covid-19 and Its Impact on Migrant Workers in India,” said that migrant workers in India were forced to set on a mass exodus to reach their home hundreds of miles away from the workplace on foot or with little transportation, on account of the abrupt, inhuman, and unplanned nationwide lockdown imposed on 24 March 2020, which deprived them of their right to life and livelihood. He proposes that the Church has to collaborate with Government and Non-Governmental Organisations to launch data card to all migrant workers ensuring their dignity, safety, security, and solidarity and take care of their families and children. Kochappilly underscored that in the economically emerging India, job opportunities and education infrastructure facilities should be created in villages and towns, so that the incessant flow of migrant workers to cities may be arrested. Speaking on “Covid-19 and Its Impact on Migrant Workers Worldwide,” **Mary Yuen** told that at a time of pandemic, keeping social distance and staying at home to work or to rest, in order to avoid personal contact, are common practices for many people. However, these measures are difficult to implement among the migrant workers, given their special working or living environment. Mary Yuen highlighted a few migrant groups, namely the male construction workers, the female domestic helpers, and the farm workers to illustrate this dilemma and the vulnerable situation they faced. She pointed out that their identities as migrant, low income class, live-in worker or living in dormitory without a home lead them to face multiple marginalization. Such a situation urges Christians to rethink the question “Who is my neighbour?” in the parable of the Good Samaritan and the injured stranger in which the arrangement of insiders and outsiders was subverted by God’s reign. We should treat the migrant workers with care and hospitality, like Jesus who welcome guests from the margins of the society. With the virtue and principle of solidarity, we would affirm the dignity and human rights of the migrant workers through various means. **Amirtham Metti** highlighted “Covid-19 and Its Impact on Women and Children.” She said that the global pandemic has hit the physical and psycho-social well-being of women and children disproportionately and the burden caused on them is heavy and painful. Especially, it has deepened the existing social and economic inequalities of women in India, making them experience that there is no lockdown for a woman. According to Metti, the unprecedented control measures to prevent virus’ spread have interrupted nearly every aspect of children’s lives; namely, their health, progress, learning, behaviour and their families’ economic security, including protection from violence and abuse.

Day 3, 29 October 2020 was dedicated to “Covid-19 and Challenges to the Life of the Church and to Democracy.” **Stanley Sahayaraj** spoke on “Covid-19 and the Life of the Church—Theological-Ethical Challenges.” He pointed out that the fragilities and vulnerabilities of the poor, as well as of the Church were exposed in this time of the Corona crisis and has altered the face of both. The Church has re-embraced humanity through technology with promises and perils. Sahayaraj emphasised that life needs to go on anchoring ourselves firmly on faith. In his paper, “Covid-19 and the Call to Sanitize Human Conscience: Covid-19 from the Perspective of *Laudato Si’ / Ecological Concerns*,” **Prem Xalxo** said that amidst severe human misery all over the world caused by Covid-19, we are challenged with some serious and pertinent existential questions related to our continued life style, our dependence on human intelligence, science and technology to solve all problems, and our interconnectedness with all living and

non-living beings on the face of the earth. According to Xalxo, human survival and prosperity are guaranteed by nurturing symbiotic relations with all life forms and by sanitizing our conscience which animates and promotes a sustainable life style directed toward care for *Our Common Home*. **James F. Keenan** presented “10 Theses on Democracy and Covid-19.” These 10 theses are: 1. Transparent governments report and contain epidemics most effectively; 2. Democracies are better at responding to catastrophes than authoritarianisms; 3. Data shows us it is still too early to know whether COVID-19, will like most epidemics, fare better in democracies; 4. Whether a democracy or an authoritative regime, herd-immunity is not a good approach; 5. Democracies can already learn ways to be more effective; 6. Allowing for rule by decree, studies of Western European lockdowns in March and April now show very good news for democracies; 7. Lockdowns have become a fault line between democracies and autocracies; 8. Some popularist leaders in democracies have instrumentalized the virus as well; 9. Still these leaders got into office by democratic elections; the people of these democracies are responsible for their failures as well; 10. COVID-19 reveals therefore much, namely, we might be able to educate the electorate and the politicians on how democracy can promote the common good in public health, as some have argued.

The conference concluded with the ‘Planning Session’. It was proposed to conduct online sessions on current topics once in three or four months. As the first step, an online conference on *Fratelli Tutti* could be arranged towards mid-January. Besides, extension lectures shall be arranged in collaboration with various institutions. It was also proposed that theme-based Study Groups shall be launched, and a committee was formed to work out the details.

Augustine Kallely
Secretary, AMTI
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