

The World and God's Word: of COVID-19, VUCA World, and Visions for the Future

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Abstract: How does one preach God's Word in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world? As the global community is challenged by postglobal economics, postnational migration, posthuman climate crisis, post-truth politics, and the pandemic, reading the Bible needs to be reassessed. A more appropriate biblical interpretation for contemporary times has to be contextual, inclusive, integrated, and transformational. Doing so will allow us to propose alternatives to a VUCA world, one that has vision clarity, has an understanding that grasps what truly matters, has the courage to shift gears, and has the agility to act on more meaningful choices to build back better a post-COVID-19 world.

Keywords: COVID-19 • VUCA • Biblical Interpretation • United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDG)

Introduction

The year 2020 will be forever etched in world history and in every individual's narrative because of the

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.67641/mstr.v23i1.670>

MST Review 23/1 (2021): 135-165.

Received, 3 May 2021; Accepted, 25 May 2021; Published 15 June 2021

COVID-19 pandemic. It surely is the start of a new era marked by a profound change in the way we look at ourselves and the world. 2020 was also declared as the Year of the Word of God by the President of the Catholic Biblical Federation (CBF), Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle to celebrate the life of St. Jerome, the great translator of the Bible, 1600 years after his death.¹ For Tagle, the global health crisis should not keep us away from God's word; instead, it should even help us to reflect deeper and make more sense of what is happening around us. He could say this with much credence for he himself has contracted the virus when he went to the Philippines for vacation.² Because of his health condition, the CBF-South East Asia's conference entitled "The Church, the Word of God and the World in a Pandemic Crisis: Coping with the Crisis in the Light of the Scriptures and Envisioning a New Normal in the Aftermath" was moved from 23 September 2020 to 28 October 2020.

Tagle's address focused on three biblical verses that believers may find meaningful during the pandemic:³ the story of Noah and his family and representatives of non-human creation in the ark (Gen 6–9) as an experience of lockdown to protect the whole creation and prepare it for regeneration; the story of the disciples huddled in a closed room, and; the appearance of the Risen Christ to Thomas (Jn 20:19-29) as a fiduciary quarantine—a journey from fear to participation and communion. Finally, he expounded on various texts that talk about

¹ Catholic Biblical Federation, *CBF South-East Asia Teleconference: The Church, the Word of God and the World in a Pandemic Crisis*, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NYlpodEH-ng&t=6225s> (accessed 2 May 2021).

² Robertzon Ramirez, "Tagle on COVID-19: You Feel You're a Threat," *Philstar.Com*, September 26, 2020, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2020/09/26/2045191/tagle-covid-19-you-feel-youre-threat> (accessed 1 May 2021).

³ Catholic Biblical Federation, *The Church, the Word of God*.

hands that inflict pain and death like the hands of the one who dipped in the same bowl with Jesus and betrayed him (Mt 26:23), of those who slapped Jesus (Jn 18:22; 19:3), and of Pilate who washed his hands to symbolize non-involvement in the death of Jesus (Mt 27:24). These examples contrast with Jesus' hands that heal and create.

This paper will integrate the reflections of Cardinal Tagle and update my response (in the conference) as the Philippines and the world battle a more severe onslaught of the COVID-19 a year after the pandemic was declared. I propose that some principles on how to read the Scriptures need to be articulated to strengthen our spiritual resource in these critical times. I will expound on this topic in three brief sections: 1) I will locate where we are right now as a community of believers; 2) I will articulate the important values we need to consider in reading the text in these challenging times, and; I will offer alternative ways of responding to the VUCA world that is made more complex by the pandemic.

COVID-19, VUCA World, and God's Word

The COVID-19 pandemic left no aspect of life undisturbed—both global and planetary. Its damages to human lives and health care,⁴ global economy,⁵ and politics and governance have been most evident.⁶ The

⁴ See <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>.

⁵ See, for example, Lora Jones, Daniele Palumbo, and David Brown, "Coronavirus: A Visual Guide to the Economic Impact," *BBC News*, June 30, 2020, sec. Business, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-51706225> (accessed 3 May 2021).

⁶ Claudia Landwehr and Armin Schäfer, "Populist, Technocratic, and Authoritarian Responses to Covid-19," *Items: Insights from the Social Sciences*, last modified July 24, 2020, <https://items.ssrc.org/covid-19-and-the-social-sciences/democracy->

pandemic complicated global migration in areas of labor, both maritime and inland, as well as forced relocations of refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons.⁷ The health crisis likewise exposed the ecological origins and the rise of zoonotic diseases.⁸ While its ecological effects include temporary increase in air and water quality in urban areas, an upsurge of water pollution due to sanitary-medical wastes has been noted.⁹ The pandemic also complicated evacuation and relief efforts during disasters like earthquake, flooding, or typhoons.¹⁰

and-pandemics/populist-technocratic-and-authoritarian-responses-to-covid-19/ (accessed 25 July 2020).

⁷ Erol Yayboke, "Five Ways COVID-19 Is Changing Global Migration," *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, last modified March 25, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/five-ways-covid-19-changing-global-migration> (accessed 25 July 2020).

⁸ Muhammad Adnan Shereen et al., "COVID-19 Infection: Origin, Transmission, and Characteristics of Human Coronaviruses," *Journal of Advanced Research* 24 (2020): 91–98; "WHO Calls for Further Studies, Data on Origin of SARS-CoV-2 Virus, Reiterates That All Hypotheses Remain Open," *World Health Organization*, last modified March 30, 2021, <https://www.who.int/news/item/30-03-2021-who-calls-for-further-studies-data-on-origin-of-sars-cov-2-virus-reiterates-that-all-hypotheses-remain-open> (accessed 1 May 2021).

⁹ Tanjena Rume and S.M. Didar-Ul Islam, "Environmental Effects of Covid-19 Pandemic and Potential Strategies of Sustainability," *Heliyon* 6, no. 9 (September 17, 2020), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7498239/> (accessed 1 May 2021).

¹⁰ See, for example, Darko Bandic, "Croatia Quake Injures 17 amid Partial Coronavirus Lockdown," *AP NEWS*, March 22, 2020, sec. AP Top News, <https://apnews.com/3f05271ed03ec32a04c96b3587420fdb> (accessed 1 May 2021); "Philippines Typhoon Recovery, Complicated by Coronavirus Concerns," *UN News*, May 15, 2020, sec. Humanitarian Aid, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/05/1064202> (accessed 1 May 2021); Lucy Craft, "Coronavirus Fear Drives Japanese Flooding Victims to Seek Shelter in Cars," *CBS News*, July 9, 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/coronavirus-in-japan-sees-flooding-and-earthquake-victims-seek-shelter-in-cars/> (accessed 1 May 2021).

These wide-ranging effects of COVID-19 intensify the idea of living in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world.¹¹ Because of the pandemic, the acronym VUCA became even more widely used in the areas of medicine,¹² economics,¹³ education,¹⁴ leadership and management,¹⁵ digitalization,¹⁶ and other disciplines. The New Testament and postcolonial scholar Fernando Segovia's Presidential Address to the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) in 2014 more critically nuances

¹¹ The acronym was first employed by the U.S. military in 1987 at the end of the Cold War to describe a new world order: U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center, "Who First Originated the Term Vuca (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity)?," *U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center*, last modified May 7, 2019, <https://usawc.libanswers.com/friendly.php?slug=faq/84869> (accessed 25 July 2020).

¹² Arti Maini et al., "Coaching Skills for Medical Education in a Vuca World," *Medical Teacher* (2020): 1–2.

¹³ Jim Tompkins, "Restarting Companies and the Economy: How to Overcome Supply Chain Challenges, Disruptions in a VUCA World," *ISE: Industrial & Systems Engineering at Work* 52, no. 7 (2020): 26–31.

¹⁴ Linor L. Hadar et al., "Rethinking Teacher Education in a VUCA World: Student Teachers' Social-Emotional Competencies During the Covid-19 Crisis," *European Journal of Teacher Education* 43, no. 4 (2020): 573–586.

¹⁵ Nate Bennett, "Understand VUCA and Better Lead Your Company through the SARS-CoV-2 Virus," *Forbes.Com*, last modified March 11, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/natebennett/2020/03/11/understand-vuca-and-better-lead-your-company-through-the-sars-cov-2-virus/>; Ingrid M. Nembhard, Lawton R. Burns, and Stephen M. Shortell, "Responding to Covid-19: Lessons from Management Research," *NEJM Catalyst Innovations in Care Delivery* (April 17, 2020), (accessed 23 August 2020; <https://catalyst.nejm.org/doi/abs/10.1056/CAT.20.0111> (accessed 25 July 2020).

¹⁶ Gordon Fletcher and Marie Griffiths, "Digital Transformation During a Lockdown," *International Journal of Information Management* (July 3, 2020): 102185. doi:10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2020.102185

the complexities we face today. For Segovia, our world faces a critical time characterized by postglobal economics that marginalizes, postnational migration, and posthuman concerns in terms of climate crisis.¹⁷ An additional layer of complexity is signified by 'post-truth', the 2016 Word of the Year which describes how emotional appeals fueled by social media and trolls as news source become more influential than objective facts in shaping public opinion seen especially in the rise of populist-authoritarian regimes.¹⁸ These intricacies affect and are, in turn, affected by the COVID-19 pandemic management.

When the pandemic was announced mid-March of 2020, the Philippine government, like the rest of the world, put the country, especially the largest island of Luzon, under enhanced community quarantine (ECQ) from 17 March to 31 May 2020. I thought it would just last for some weeks and that we as faith community will have a very meaningful experience of Lent and Holy Week, a dramatic one as we emerge as new people, a new community in Easter. At that time, the immediate question for churches was "How do we best practice our belief while keeping our staff and congregations safe"? Following quarantine protocols, parishes suspended masses, weddings, baptisms, and other activities that draw people together. After two Lenten seasons, COVID-19 cases peaked again in March 2021. The ECQ was reimplemented in the National Capital Region and the provinces of Bulacan, Rizal, Laguna and Cavite or NCR

¹⁷ Fernando F. Segovia, "Criticism in Critical Times: Reflections on Visions and Task," *JBL* 134, no. 1 (2015): 16–21.

¹⁸ British Broadcasting Corporation, "'Post-Truth' Declared Word of the Year by Oxford Dictionaries," *BBC News*, November 16, 2016, sec. UK, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-37995600> (accessed 30 July 2019); Guy Neave, "Foreword: A Vision Unspeakable," in *Post-Truth, Fake News: Viral Modernity & Higher Education*, ed. Michael A. Peters et al. (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2018), v.

Plus from the Holy Triduum and the whole of the Easter season, from 29 March to 11 April 2021. It was followed by the second strictest level of lockdown, the modified enhanced community quarantine (MECQ) until 14 May 2021.¹⁹

The havoc of the pandemic was unprecedented. The number of cases and deaths rose, including medical front liners.²⁰ Job losses shoot up to 27 M in July 2020 (28% from 17% in December 2019),²¹ with the daily wage earners being the first casualties while overseas and local migrant workers immediately followed suit as small and medium enterprises register losses and bankruptcies.²² Transport restrictions imperiled transfer of peoples and goods and the job of transport workers. Arrests of so-called quarantine violators increased as people desperately sought for ways to feed their families.²³

¹⁹ Krissy Aguilar, “MECQ in NCR Plus Extended Until May 14,” *Inquirer.Net*, last modified April 28, 2021, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1425008/break-mecq-in-ncr-plus-extended-until-may-14> (accessed 2 May 2021).

²⁰ ABS-CBN News, “Hospitals Told to Beef up Infection Control as More Health Workers Catch Covid-19,” *ABS-CBN News*, April 14, 2021, sec. News, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/04/14/21/hospitals-told-to-beef-up-infection-control-as-more-health-workers-catch-covid-19> (accessed 2 May 2021).

²¹ Jose Torres, Jr., “Millions Suffer Job Loss in Philippines Due to Pandemic, Survey Says,” *Catholic News in Asia - LiCAS.News*, August 17, 2020, <https://www.licas.news/2020/08/17/millions-suffer-job-loss-in-philippines-due-to-pandemic-survey-says/> (accessed 2 May 2021).

²² For a more comprehensive picture of the labor situation in the Philippines, see Country Office for the Philippines International Labour Organization, *COVID-19 Labour Market Impact in the Philippines: Assessment and National Policy Responses* (International Labour Organization, 2020), https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---ilo-manila/documents/publication/wcms_762209.pdf (accessed 2 May 2021).

²³ Lian Buan, “After a Year of Arrests, DOJ Says ‘Don’t Detain Quarantine Violators,’” *Rappler*, April 5, 2021, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/doj-now-says-do-not-detain-quarantine-violators-april-2021> (accessed 2 May 2021).

Militarization escalated as the health crisis is perceived as a war against 'unseen enemies', health and economics were pitted against each other, and socio-cultural approaches to the pandemic were ignored.²⁴

While the stench of death was creeping, Easter still came and signs of life burst somehow. While urging the government to shift the COVID-19 response from military to medical,²⁵ partnership among government sectors, civil society, and the Church intensified: fundraising, transport services for front liners, food packs for those at the margins, universities converted into packing stations for food relief efforts, community kitchens, and dormitories for medical front liners and street families, and church groups serving as conduits for exchange of agricultural goods between farmers, fisherfolks and consumers.²⁶ Parishes accommodated locally stranded individuals and provided psychosocial-

²⁴ Karl Hapal, "The Philippines' Covid-19 Response: Securitising the Pandemic and Disciplining the Pasaway," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* (March 18, 2021): 1868103421994261; Nick Aspinwall, "As Hunger Rises, Philippine Authorities Take Aim at Critics," *The New Humanitarian*, April 20, 2021, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2021/4/20/food-hunger-and-covid-19-in-the-philippines> (accessed 2 May 2021).

²⁵ Mark Saludes, "Philippine Church, Civil Society Groups Call for 'Medical Response' to Pandemic," *Catholic News in Asia - LiCAS.News*, August 6, 2020, <https://www.licas.news/2020/08/06/philippine-church-civil-society-groups-call-for-medical-response-to-pandemic/> (accessed 2 May 2021).

²⁶ Ronald U. Mendoza, *COVID-19: Navigating Inclusive Recovery towards the New Normal*, SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, May 11, 2020), <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=3598116> (accessed 2 May 2021); Gabriel Pabico Lalu, "Robredo Says Her People of the Year Award Belongs to Volunteers in Fight Vs Covid-19," *Inquirer.Net*, April 13, 2021, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1418225/robredo-says-donors-volunteers-should-receive-local-magazines-people-of-the-year-award> (accessed 2 May 2021).

spiritual supports.²⁷ Online masses via YouTube and Facebook to keep the faith became the norm. Community pantries mushroomed nationally.²⁸ What changed? The question for the Church as a community evolved from how to keep church members safe to how to also make sure that no one is left behind, especially those who are at the margins and most vulnerable.

These continuing and converging efforts concretize what I suggested elsewhere on how to make sense of God's presence during and in the aftermath of disasters.²⁹

²⁷ See, for example, Joseph Peter Calleja, "Philippine Govt Praises Church Pandemic Efforts," *Ucanews.Com*, last modified April 29, 2020, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/philippine-govt-praises-church-pandemic-efforts/87859> (accessed 2 May 2021); Johanna L. Añes-de la Cruz, "This Religious Congregation Has Already Distributed P13.9m Worth of Covid-19 Aid," *ABS-CBN News*, May 17, 2020, sec. Life, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/life/05/17/20/this-religious-congregation-has-already-distributed-p139m-worth-of-covid-19-aid> (accessed 2 May 2021); Joseph Peter Calleja, "Philippine Jesuit Charity Groups Unite Against Covid-19," *Ucanews.Com*, June 3, 2020, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/philippine-jesuit-charity-groups-unite-against-covid-19/88258> (accessed 2 May 2021); Joseph Peter Calleja, "Jesuit University Answers Philippine Red Cross Covid Call - Uca News," *Ucanews.Com*, April 7, 2021, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/jesuit-university-answers-philippine-red-cross-covid-call/92021> (accessed 2 May 2021).

²⁸ Juli Suazo, "What the Community Pantry Movement Means for Filipinos," *Cnnphilippines.Com*, April 19, 2021, <https://cnnphilippines.com/life/culture/2021/4/19/community-pantry-filipinos-pandemic.html> (accessed 3 May 2021); Robin Gomes, "'Community Pantries' for Needy Mushrooming in the Philippines," *Vatican News*, April 23, 2021, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2021-04/philippines-community-pantries-bishops-caritas-kindness-stations.html> (accessed 3 May 2021).

²⁹ Ma. Maricel S. Ibita, "New Heaven, New Earth and the *Skene* of God (Rev 21,1-8): Making Sense of God's Presence During and in the Aftermath of Ecological Disasters," in *New Perspectives on the Book of Revelation*, BETL 291 (Leuven: Peeters, 2017), 563–580. See also Lourdes Ladrido-Ignacio, ed., *Ginhawa: Well-Being in the Aftermath of Disasters* (Pasig City: Philippine Psychiatrists Association, 2011).

Its practical implications include consideration of the impact of disaster on the community locally and globally, immediate attention to the physical well-being of the victims especially the most vulnerable (elderly, children, person with disabilities, responders, etc.), institutionalization of capacity and alliance building, training, and cooperation, and a focus on sustainable psycho-social-spiritual health that transforms victims into survivors.

Moreover, the role of God's Word as a spiritual resource in psycho-social-spiritual health amidst the threat of COVID-19 cannot be overemphasized.³⁰

God's Word: How do you read it in a VUCA World and in the Time of Pandemic?

Given the aforementioned complexities of our world, Segovia suggests that a "global-systemic approach" is needed in interpreting the biblical text, i.e., global (in terrain or sphere of action), systemic (discursive context), objective (in terms of the major crises in our time), wide (production and consumption), and diverse in its lens (models of interpretation, types of questions) to effectively respond to this contemporary world we live in and better plan one that we would like to build.³¹ A good number of methods is already enumerated in the 1993 Interpretation of the Bible in the Church (IBC),³² while

³⁰ Consuelo Marquez, "Govt Seeks Religious Sector's Help Amid 'Alarming' Rise in Suicide Cases—Guevarra," *Inquirer.Net*, August 22, 2020, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1325691/govt-seeks-religious-sectors-aid-to-give-guidance-to-those-suffering-from-mental-health-issues-guevarra-says> (accessed 2 May 2021).

³¹ Segovia, "Criticism," 26.

³² Pontifical Biblical Commission, "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," *Origins* 23, no. 29 (1994): 497-524. Jeremy Corley, "Methods of Biblical Interpretation: A Guide," *Scripture Bulletin* 30,

new methods continue to develop as seen in the hundreds of yearly presentations at the Annual Meeting of the SBL.³³

What principles underlie the evolution of these methods of biblical interpretation? How should we read texts? In Luke 10:25-37, the context of the story of the Samaritan who attended to the man victimized by robbers was the question of the lawyer to Jesus on what one should do to inherit eternal life. In Greek, the answer of Jesus can be translated as “What do you read?” or “How do you read”? If one translates it as a *what* question, one will come up with the answer of the lawyer. If one translates it with a *how* question, one will understand how Jesus’ parable played with the Hebrew vowels that spell the difference between *rēʾă*, “neighbor” (Lev 19:18) and *rāʾ*, “bad, enemy”. True to his Jewishness, Jesus in the Lukan gospel shows creativity in interpreting the Scriptures, expanding its meaning, and demonstrating how God’s word is alive.

My own theological formation is rooted in the vision that theologizing should be contextual, inclusive, integrated, and transformational.³⁴ I have already suggested elsewhere that these values could also be particularized and applied to our interpretation of the biblical text in our global contemporary context,³⁵

no. 2 (2000): 2–15 provides practical applications of these methods using the widow’s mite story in Mk 12:41-44 and Lk 21:1-4.

³³ See, for example, the PDF of the program books of the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature from 1952 to present available at <http://pitts.emory.edu/collections/digitalcollections/programbooks.cfm> and the online program book available at https://www.sbl-site.org/meetings/congresses_pastmeetings.aspx.

³⁴ See the Vision and Mission of the Institute of Formation and Religious Studies, available at <https://www.ifrs.com.ph/about-us/visionmission>.

³⁵ Ma. Maricel S. Ibita, “With My Mouth I Will Give Thanks...” (Ps 109:30a): The Contribution of Leuven Biblical Scholarship to the

especially as we navigate our way through the COVID-19 pandemic. Let me describe them briefly.

Contextual

While there are timeless truths in the Scriptures, the authors, the editors, the hearers, the readers, and the interpreters of Scriptures are bounded by space and time. As Pope Francis reiterated in *Evangelii Gaudium*, 147:³⁶

...the biblical text which we study is two or three thousand years old; its language is very different from that which we speak today. Even if we think we understand the words translated into our own language, this does not mean that we correctly understand what the sacred author wished to say. The different tools provided by literary analysis are well known: attention to words which are repeated or emphasized, recognition of the structure and specific movement of a text, consideration of the role played by the different characters, and so forth.

The biblical texts, therefore, do not only narrate stories; they also have backstories. It is important that one familiarizes oneself with the background of the original author, editor, and readers by using the historical critical methods (HCM): textual, source, genre, redaction, tradition criticism.³⁷ The HCM are very important nowadays as tools to combat post-truth. It is also vital

Field in the Past Fifty Years and the Future of Biblical Studies in Light of Psalm 109," *Louvain Studies* 42, no. 4 (2019): 381–386.

³⁶ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World*, Vatican.va, last modified November 24, 2013, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html (accessed 3 May 2021).

³⁷ See Corley, "Interpretation," 3–7.

that the interpreter considers the literary contexts of the text that one reads in its immediate and larger contexts vis-à-vis the unique theology found in each book of the Scriptures.³⁸ One cannot just use the biblical verses as prooftexts. When one asks for the relevance of the biblical text for contemporary times, it is also necessary that one acknowledges her/his own context, be honest with one's own biases and ideologies, and practice self-correction in his/her dialogue with the text and explorations of its historical and literary contexts.³⁹ This is the main reason for consciously situating ourselves as part of a global community and as individual believers.

Inclusive

Another aspect of biblical interpretation in these challenging times is the need to be aware not only of who we include in our reading of biblical texts but also those that we exclude. Do we pay attention to how children and old people, indigenous tribes, differently abled persons, members of the LGBTQ+ communities, especially those who got infected by COVID-19 understand the Scriptures? Do we see these people represented in the Scriptures? How about non-human creatures, do we also acknowledge their unique relationship with God and with humans, both apart and together? When we are safe in our homes and attending webinars and online classes, our understanding of the biblical text differs from those who have to go for an 8 to 12-hour medical duty in a COVID-19 ward, those who are sick or taking care of an infected household member, or those who are frantically seeking ways to find food for the table while being hounded by the *barangay* officials, or those who are red-tagged by the police or military for setting up community

³⁸ Ibid., 7–9.

³⁹ Ibid., 12–14.

pantries. Our social location, i.e., economic, educational, gender, age, ethnic, ideological backgrounds, etc. influence the way we read the Scriptures.

Integrated

Interpreting the biblical text should also be enriched by other disciplines like social and exact sciences.⁴⁰ Reading the Scriptures should involve our whole being – minds, hearts, emotions, spirit. As Rolando de la Rosa underlined:

Since March [2020], we have been reciting the ***Oratio Imperata***, ardently, asking God to finally end the COVID-19 pandemic. It seems that His answer is not forthcoming because our prayer sounds too polite, too sanitized, uncontaminated by real anguish, morbid fear, and anxiety. Desperate times call for desperation. What we need to pray these days is ***Oratio Desperata***, somewhat like that of the prophets who fiercely lashed out at God...⁴¹

Let me clarify my agreement with him on the necessity of articulating our emotions and the need for a more authentic communion with God.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann likens the life of faith with seasons of life. In his interpretation of the psalms, he explains that we experience three movements in our life: orientation, disorientation, and new orientation.⁴² Orientation means that everything is

⁴⁰ Ibid., 11–12. Exact sciences are employed, for example, in ecological and queer hermeneutics.

⁴¹ Rolando V. De la Rosa, "Through Untrue: Oratio Desperata," *Manila Bulletin*, August 15, 2020, <https://mb.com.ph/2020/08/15/oratio-desperata/> (accessed 2 May 2021).

⁴² Walter Brueggemann, "Psalms and the Life of Faith: A Suggested Typology of Function," *JSOT* 5, no. 17 (1980): 3–32; Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological*

okay and fine, and it is easy to pray and praise God. However, life also enters disorientation or loss of security, or of footing, sometimes slowly or sometimes abruptly: job loss, eviction from our houses, devastating typhoon, volcanic eruption, getting sick, or death. When we include COVID-19 in these equations, life and emotions become more complex. When we are going through difficult and challenging times, our relationship with the Divine seems ‘contrived and incoherent’ when we only insist on singing praise songs even if the emotions raging inside us are denial, grief, anger, uncertainty, fear, etc. In the Scriptures, especially in the psalms, we find God’s people calling on God’s faithfulness to the covenant, arguing with God, questioning God. Even Jesus cried out on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” (Mark 15:34; Mt 27:46). Unfortunately, lament is a very neglected part of our Scripture reading, common liturgy, and maybe even personal prayer. This disregard of lament is unhealthy psycho-socio-culturally and spiritually. Feelings of pain, sadness, abandonment, anger, and even rage are articulated in Israel’s individual and communal laments. Our Jewish-Christian scriptures equip us with these vital spiritual resources and gift us an image of God who can deal with our difficult questions and accept our humanness in all its fullness. If we think that we should not complain to God because “God is God” and “We should not talk back to our elders,”⁴³ then we forget that our ancestors in faith, in their dynamic covenant relationship with God, did not shy away from asking God serious

Commentary, Augsburg Old Testament Studies (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1984), 19–23.

⁴³ See Federico G. Villanueva, “My God, Why?,” in *Why, O God?: Disaster, Resiliency, and the People of God*, ed. Athena E. Gorospe, Charles Ringma, and Karen Hollenbeck-Wuest (Manila: Asian Theological Seminary/OMF Literature, 2017), 87–99, 91.

questions, raising concerns about injustice, betrayal, and perceived abandonment of the divine. To sing songs of joy in difficult moments without voicing collective doubts, fear, pain, discouragement, sadness, etc. make our worship less authentic. If we cannot come before God as we are, to whom else shall we go (Jn 6:68)? We need to learn how to weep.⁴⁴ Weeping and crying out generate God's response and is at the core of our faith in the God who liberates us from whatever shackles or oppresses us.⁴⁵ Exodus 3:7 tells of a God who observes the misery of people, who hears their cry, and who knows their suffering. Biblical scholars have already pointed out the costly loss of lament, of quelling spiritual dissent:⁴⁶ (1) inability to lament waters down our being covenant partners of God because we have ceased to be dialogue partners and have only become yes-people of a seemingly punishing or absent god; (2) it stifles questions of theodicy or raising questions when evil things happens to good and innocent people and when we fail to legitimately question matters of injustice and oppression; (3) we forget that words in our Jewish-Christian faith have world-making capacities and, therefore, can help us

⁴⁴ Ma. Maricel S. Ibita, "Learn How to Weep': The Contemporary Challenge of Lament in Today's World," *Louvain Studies* 41, no. 4 (2018): 377–391.

⁴⁵ David A. Bosworth, "Weeping in the Psalms," *Vetus Testamentum* 63, no. 1 (2013): 36–46.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Walter Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," *JSOT* 36 (1986): 57–71; Michael Neary, "The Importance of Lament in the God/Man Relationship in Ancient Israel," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 52, no. 3 (1986): 180–192; Irene Nowell, "War and Peace in the Psalms: How to Pray in Times of Crisis," *Bible Today* 46, no. 3 (2008): 149–153; Leonard P. Mare, "An Introduction to Risking Truth: Reshaping the World through Prayers of Lament," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 18, no. 2 (2009): 172–176; Barbara Rossing, "God Laments with Us: Climate Change, Apocalypse and the Urgent Kairos Moment," *The Ecumenical Review* 62, no. 2 (2010): 119–130.

articulate and construct new realities; and (4) our inability to lament diminishes our being made in the image and likeness of God who upholds justice, peace, integrity, and sustainability of all creation. As Pope Francis says, “Never silence a crying baby in the Church...it is the voice that attracts God’s tenderness.”⁴⁷

Brueggemann also talks about new orientation, when after relinquishing our disorientation to God, we gently or sharply perceive the presence of new life around us without forgetting the pain and hurt of disorientation. It embraces the new reality without denying the scars of disorientation as seen in the story of Exodus from slavery and in the Resurrection of Jesus. Tagle mentioned in his reflection on Jn 20:19-29 about the disciples being huddled in a closed room, afraid of the authorities and maybe of the Risen Jesus himself because they knew how they betrayed and abandoned him.⁴⁸ The Risen Christ, however, penetrated locked doors to explain to them why the Messiah had to suffer and rose again on the third day according to Scriptures (Lk 24:13-49), to breathe unto them the Spirit (Jn 20:21-22), and to send them to all the world and preach the good news to all of creation (Mk 16:14-15). In two of the gospels, these encounters are heralded by the showing of who Jesus is for them through his wounded hands (Lk 24:30-32, 37-40; Jn 20:25-29). Just like these wounded hands, every mark of personal protective equipment (PPE) on our medical front liners signifies resurrection life, the readiness to lay down one’s life for others.

⁴⁷ Javier Romero, “Pope Francis: Never Silence a Crying Baby in Church,” *Rome Reports*, October 21, 2020, <https://www.romereports.com/2020/10/21/pope-francis-never-silence-a-crying-baby-in-church> (accessed 2 May 2021).

⁴⁸ Catholic Biblical Federation, *The Church, the Word of God*.

Transformational

Being contextual, inclusive, and integrated lead to the fourth characteristic of biblical interpretation: it should be transformational. It is the responsiveness to the Spirit that filled Jesus as he began his ministry (Lk 4:16-20) and that Jesus breathed unto the disciples (Jn 20:22). Both instances are reminiscent of the breath of life that the LORD God breathed unto the earth creature so it can till the earth and participate in the transformation of the barren field to a flourishing garden (Gen 2:5,7). In Luke, it is the transforming mission of Jesus; in John it is the transforming mission of the disciples. The Spirit opens the believers to the signs of the times and transforms the dynamics between members of God's creation, communities, interrelations, institutions, and structures to be more life-giving and life-sustaining. In reading the Scriptures, God's will is revealed to us and we are also revealed to ourselves. "Biblical interpretation, like all scholarly inquiry, is a communicative practice that involves interests, values, and visions."⁴⁹ It is, thus, important to ask who is served by our reading and interpretation of the Scriptures.⁵⁰ This is where contextual approaches to the Bible come in. It uses liberation theology, feminist theories, ecological hermeneutics, trauma theories, disability studies, postcolonial approaches, political exegesis, etc. Contextual reading seriously considers the experiences

⁴⁹ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship," *JBL* 107, no. 1 (1988): 3–17.

⁵⁰ See Reimund Bieringer and Mary Elsbernd, "Introduction: The 'Normativity of the Future Approach': Its Roots, Development, Current State and Challenges," in *Normativity of the Future: Reading Biblical and Other Authoritative Texts in an Eschatological Perspective*, ed. Reimund Bieringer and Mary Elsbernd, *Annua Nuntia Lovaniensia* 61 (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 3–25, 21.

and situations of the readers and include them in the ongoing recontextualization of the relevance of the Bible as we work for justice, sustainability, and inclusivity for all.⁵¹ In our contemporary contexts, it has to do with a new vision for the post-COVID-19 world.

God's Word, COVID-19, and Visions for an Alternative VUCA World

How do we build a global community that is respectful of contexts, inclusive, integrated, and transformative in these challenging times? In her Arete Magisterial Lecture, chemist and professor Ma. Assunta Cuyegkeng uses the pastoral cycle to discuss technology and offers a way to reframe the VUCA world.⁵² For her, one can opt for vision clarity when there is volatility, for understanding that grasps what truly matters when there is uncertainty, for courage to shift gears when there is complexity, and for agility to make more meaningful choices when there is ambiguity.⁵³ These manners of renaming and reframing the VUCA world embody the four characteristics of our ways of interpreting the Scriptures so we can help in building back better during these challenging times of the pandemic.

Instead of volatility, *vision clarity* could be related to

⁵¹ On recontextualization as a technical theological terms, see Didier Pollefeyt and Jan Bouwens, "Framing the Identity of Catholic Schools: Empirical Methodology for Quantitative Research on the Catholic Identity of an Education Institute," *International Studies in Catholic Education* 2, no. 2 (2010): 193–211.

⁵² Ma. Assunta Cuyegkeng, "Living with Technology in a VUCA World" (Presented at the Arete Magisterial Lectures, Ateneo de Manila University, Quezon City, July 31, 2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FkMK5AaiOzs> (accessed 25 August 2020); Justin Sands, "Introducing Cardinal Cardijn's See–Judge–Act as an Interdisciplinary Method to Move Theory into Practice," *Religions* 9, no. 4 (2018): 10/10.

⁵³ Cuyegkeng, "Living."

the importance of contextualizing where we are. The questions that Catholic theologian-storyteller Megan McKenna poses to her hearers after reading the Scriptures could help us.⁵⁴

The question, “How do you feel?” allows the hearers to be aware of bodily and psychological response to the biblical story, helping them to incarnate or personalize God's Word. The question, “What is true in the story?” helps people to transcend themselves, connect with others, and look for the universal character of the story, its actors, and its message. The question, “What is disturbing in the story?”, facilitates critical thinking on the various contexts and aspects of the story.

Asking these simple yet important questions courageously confront the five Ps of our global community life—postglobal, postnational, posthuman, conditioned by post-truth, and ravaged by the pandemic. Tagle's insight on the Risen Christ's breathing of the Spirit to the disciples and commissioning them to proclaim the good news to all of creation also gives us vision clarity of who we are called to be.⁵⁵

We can employ the seventeen United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) as guidelines and measures of the world we are called to build during this pandemic and its aftermath: no poverty, zero hunger, good health and well-being, quality education, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, decent work and economic growth, energy, innovation and infrastructure, reduced inequalities, sustainable cities and communities, responsible consumption and production, climate action, life below water, life on land, peace and justice strong institutions,

⁵⁴ Ma. Maricel S. Ibita, “Rejoice with Me! Preaching the Joy of the Gospel as Cornerstone of Parish Community Life,” *Pamisulu* 5, no. 2 (2018): 37–38.

⁵⁵ Catholic Biblical Federation, *The Church, the Word of God*.

and the partnerships to achieve all the goals.⁵⁶

Against the uncertainty of a VUCA world, *understanding what truly matters* means that no one should be left behind as we build the world envisioned by the UNSDG. Tagle observes that in the story of the great flood, the ark floating in uncertainty seems to invite readers to a future marked with uncertainty and needing the patience of Noah and the patience of God so regeneration and recreation can commence.⁵⁷ Disturbingly, the story of the Great Flood is also a moral lesson and question on discerning who gets to be included or excluded in the safety of the ark. In COVID-19 pandemic terms, how do we roll out a global vaccination program to achieve an inclusive herd immunity? The Immunization Agenda 2030 (IA2030) program of the World Health Organization envisions

a world where everyone, everywhere, at every age, fully benefits from vaccines to improve health and well-being. It aims to maintain hard-won gains in immunization, recover from the disruptions caused by COVID-19, and achieve even more – by leaving no one behind, in any situation or at any stage of life.⁵⁸

The world will only be able to respond effectively to the pandemic and move forward when the weakest and most vulnerable are protected and included in the plans to build a better world.

Against the complexity of a VUCA world during this pandemic, we also need the *courage to shift gears*. The various emotions generated by fear of the disease,

⁵⁶ See “Sustainable Development Goals,” *United Nations Sustainable Development*, <https://www.un.org/sustainable-development/sustainable-development-goals/> (accessed 5 April 2020).

⁵⁷ Catholic Biblical Federation, *The Church, the Word of God*.

⁵⁸ See <https://www.who.int/teams/immunization-vaccines-and-biologicals/strategies/ia2030>, (accessed 2 May 2021).

economic uncertainty, social isolation, overwhelming grief because of suffering and death need to be addressed. Mental health should be included in COVID-19 response lest it becomes another unseen pandemic.⁵⁹ This is where integration of the individual person and the community is needed and why the inclusion of socio-cultural-spiritual interventions are necessary. Laments allow us to hear how human suffering, hardships, uncertainties transform into questioning and move toward relating, "Until when, Lord?" (Ps 13:1-2).⁶⁰ For Pope Francis,

Every suffering calls for liberation, every tear calls for consolation, every wound awaits healing, every slander a sentence of absolution...By constantly asking such questions, the Psalms teach us not to get used to pain, and remind us that life is not saved unless it is healed... *It makes sense to cry out.*⁶¹

To cry out against the COVID-19 pandemic and the Philippine government's draconian measures that intensify people's suffering is to be accompanied by the psalmist who "asks God to intervene where all human efforts are in vain. That is why prayer, in and of itself, is the way of salvation and the beginning of salvation."⁶² For Pope Francis, the Psalms show us the journey from suffering to questioning to relating. He recalls Jn 11:17-44 when Martha and Mary complained to Jesus about the death of their brother Lazarus, how he groaned in spirit,

⁵⁹ Roy Rillera Marzo et al., "Factors Associated with Psychological Distress among Filipinos during Coronavirus Disease-19 Pandemic Crisis," *Maced J Med Sci* 8, no. T1 (2007): 309-313.

⁶⁰ Pope Francis, "General Audience of 14 October 2020: Catechesis: 10. The Prayer of the Psalms. 1," *Vatican.va*, last modified October 14, 2020, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20201014_udienza-generale.html (accessed 3 May 2021).

⁶¹ *Ibid.* Italics in the original.

⁶² *Ibid.*

was deeply troubled and wept. And restored Lazarus to life. This weeping Jesus, for Pope Francis, is an image of consolation in uncertain times: the Word became Flesh so God can weep with us.⁶³

Against the ambiguity of a VUCA world, proclaimers of God's Word are also called to be *agile to act on more meaningful choices*. It is the ability to envision the bigger picture because individual's and community's visions are clear, they understand the things that matter, and the courage to shift gears. Tagle correctly observes that the pandemic exposed the divisiveness that is well-rooted in humanity, the economic disparity, the scandalous allotment of resources for weapons and national security while there are not enough resources for medicine, for compensation and protection of medical front liners, even for masks.⁶⁴ He asks, "How could we turn the pandemic into an encounter with the Lord?"⁶⁵ He recalls that when Jesus was crucified, the disciples gathered together behind closed doors for fear of the authorities and maybe even of Jesus; they also feared their own faults, infidelities, betrayal. Nevertheless, the Risen Christ's showing of his wounded hands and feet, his greeting of peace, and the promise of the Spirit transformed the disciples fear to participation in the mission of proclaiming the good news and forgiveness. The violent

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Catholic Biblical Federation, *The Church, the Word of God*; Neil Arwin Mercado, "Tap NTF-Elcac's P19b-Budget to Fund Proposed P10k Subsidy, Bayanihan 3 – Lawmaker," *Inquirer.Net*, April 21, 2021, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1421962/tap-ntf-elcacs-p19b-budget-to-fund-proposed-p10k-subsidy-bayanihan-3-lawmaker> (accessed 3 May 2021); Ryan Eduard Benaid, "Health and Human Rights Crisis in the Philippines, One Year into Pandemic," *Amnesty International*, April 26, 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/04/philippines-faces-health-human-rights-crisis-covid/> (accessed 3 May 2021)

⁶⁵ Catholic Biblical Federation, *The Church, the Word of God*.

wind of Pentecost and the fire of the Spirit opened not only the closed door of the house where they were but also further released them from their fears. The Risen Lord's patient explanation of the Scriptures to them on the road to Emmaus and within closed doors (Lk 24:13-49) help them to be sensitive to the promptings of the Spirit, making them agile to make the meaningful choice of communion and participation in God's forgiveness.

Conclusion

In face of the challenging VUCA world characterized by the five Ps that the Church finds itself, believers are called to understand the Word of God with eyes cleansed by tears,⁶⁶ so our values and visions are clearer, our judgment better, and our actions more effective and affective. An alternative to a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world is a contextual, inclusive, integrated, and transformational reading of God's Word in the world for us. These alternatives allow us to have vision clarity, to have an understanding that grasps what truly matters, to have the courage to shift gears, and to have the agility to act on more meaningful choices that will help us build back better in a COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 world as manifested by the global community's attainment of all the 17 UNSDGs, together, at the same time, and with no one left behind.

* This study is dedicated to Sr. Mirasol Navidad, RSCJ and Prof. Dr. Jose M. de Mesa. Their contributions in the fields of biblical studies, theology, and adult theological education are most valued. My thanksgiving to their fully lived lives even though cut short by the COVID-19 pandemic. We celebrate them.

⁶⁶ Pope Francis, "Full Text: Pope Francis' Message, Youth Encounter, UST," trans. Mark Gerard Miles, *Rappler*, last modified 18 Jan 2015, <http://www.rappler.com/specials/pope-francis-ph/81203-full-text-pope-francis-message-youth-ust> (accessed 3 May 2021).

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