

› Ecclesial mission and diaconia in times of pandemic crisis: Theological-interdisciplinary considerations

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Introduction

- › Our study on the topic asks the following questions:
 - › What was the social nature of the church as a group of followers of Jesus?
 - › How did the church respond to pandemic crises in history?
 - › How did the early Christians understand themselves as an alternative community, which in turn prodded them to respond to social crises.

Introduction

- › We aim at:
 - › revisiting the essential nature of the Christian church (as gleaned from some NT texts)
 - › tracing significant responses of the church to pandemic crises in its life and history
 - › explicating an ethic of solidarity as a church's missional and diaconal posture in times of pandemic

Introduction

- › This presentation argues that the social engagements of the early communion of Christ's loyalists and their positive responses to various social crises are a hermeneutical window through which the church of today may discern and discover dynamic and creative ways in undertaking its mission and diaconia as a concrete manifestation of being a body of Christ in times of pandemic.

Nature of the church (ekklesia)

- › At the outset the church was born out of or in the midst of various (social, political and economic) crises.
 - › politically - Roman imperial hegemony that was characterized by domination and repression
 - › economically - scarce resources in a limited good society that exacerbated disenfranchisement of the have-nots
 - › socially - pater familias, slave society
- › the church seen as an alternative *ekklesia* within the Roman imperial order
 - › The church is a called out (*ek + kaleō*) assembly to render service to the Lord Jesus (not the Caesar in Rome)
 - › This alternative assembly sought to embody God's reign/kingdom in the *oikoumene*.

Nature of the church (ekklesia)

- › 1. (Preferential) option for the un(der)served and victims of exclusion
 - › Mk 7,24–30. The story features a striking dialogue between Jesus and a non-Jewish (Syrophoenician) woman, who wishes that Jesus heal her sick daughter.
 - › Contextually, the story reflects undercurrent racial dynamics (between Jews and Gentiles, the latter being represented by the Syrophoenician woman).
 - › Salvation-historical interpretation of this text identifies “the early Christian struggle to overcome a particularism about salvation that was derived from Israel’s preeminence.” (E.g., R. Pesch, *Das Markusevangelium*, 390, cited by Theißen, *The Gospels in Context*, 65.)

Nature of the church (ekklesia)

- › 2. Love-Altruism
 - › Altruism - from the Latin alter (“other”) —> “other-ism”
 - › A close biblical example would be John 15:13: “No one has greater love than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”
 - › Auguste Comte, who probably coined the term, said that the goal of morality is to “teach us to live for others. Its aim being to fit us for the unintermitting service of Humanity...”
 - › altruism as “religion of Humanity”
 - › self-denial as a way of life
 - › Objection from Friedrich Nietzsche: “the feelings of devotion, self-sacrifice for one’s neighbor, the whole morality of self-denial must be questioned mercilessly and taken to court [...]. There is too much church and sugar in the feelings of ‘for others’, of ‘not for myself’, for us not to need to become doubly suspicious at this point.”

Nature of the church (ekklesia)

- › 3. Disinterested religiosity
 - › By “disinterested” we mean here “impartiality” or “no consideration of personal advantage”
 - › disinterested religiosity does not romanticize or capitalize religion for personal ends
 - › rather, it looks at religion as a mystical element of human existence that facilitates holistic benefaction.
 - › James 1:27 “Religion (*thrēskeia*) that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

The church's mission and diakonia

- › Mission
 - › A basic and prevailing understanding of the church's mission is that of making known God's love (e.g., Alvin Lindgren, Purposeful Church Administration). In this understanding, the church is seen as:
 - › mediator (diakonos) of God's love
 - › earthly vicar (representative) of God's love
 - › Missiologists have attempted to explain the complex relationship between God's mission (missio Dei) and the church's missions (missiones ecclesiae). God's mission could be imagined as God turning to the world in the fullness of God's love (cf. John 3:16ff.; D. Bosch). Missiones ecclesiae can only be understood in light of such premise of God's proactive dealing with the affairs of humankind and the world, and thus stand in service to the missio Dei. So writes David Bosch: "In its mission, the church witnesses to the fullness of the promise of God's reign and participates in the ongoing struggle between that reign and the powers of darkness and evil" (from *Transforming Mission*)

The church's mission and diakonia

- › Diaconia (Gk. *diakonia*, “service”)
 - › When we come to the terminology of diaconia (service, ministry), one does not need to put a dividing line between it and mission. For, diaconia is an integral part of the church's mission. It is an important characteristic of a church that is (or seeks to be) faithful to God's mission. It concretely manifests the church's solidarity with those who suffer and are marginalized.
 - › Based on its nature, the church is both missional and diaconal. Jesus Christ himself demonstrated such a diaconia par excellence in his earthly ministry:
 - › “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).
 - › “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross” (Phil 2:5–8).

The church's mission and diakonia

- › Diaconia (Gk. *diakonia*, “service”)
 - › Diaconia is a social terminology. It denotes an act of service to another entity or individual. Its Latin counterpart conveys this social dimension, whereby the agent (minister) renders service or help. Diakonia is among many functions in the Greco-Roman world that convey social representations or intermediary roles:
 - › *angelos* - messenger, envoy
 - › *apostolos* - ambassador
 - › *diakonos* - attendants, diviners, heralds
 - › *exaitēsis* - intercessor
 - › *epitropos* - agent, representative
 - › *mesitēs* - mediator
 - › *paraitētēs* - intercessor
 - › *paraklētos* - a broker, a mediator
 - › *prophētēs* - one who speaks for God

The church's mission and diakonia

- › Diaconia (Gk. *diakonia*, “service”)
 - › Diaconia (diakonos, diakoneō) is an active word. In the New Testament the Greek verb diakoneō takes, in most cases, other entities as receivers of the action, exclusively an indirect object (in Dative case, e.g., Matt 4:11 “the angels served Jesus”). In the Gospels there is one incident where Jesus refutes a somewhat reflexive understanding of service (reflected by the passive formulation), such as the desire to receive service than the other way around (cf. Matt 20:26–28, par.).
 - › Diaconia is rendered by, for, and among equals. This image can be seen in early communities of believers. For instance, in responding to the issue of division in Corinth (1 Cor 3), Paul points out that the common ground he and Apollos share is their being servants (diakonoi) of God (v. 5), working together (v. 7). This sense is also implicit in Jesus' exhortation to his disciples concerning greatness. The Essenes, which established a religious community of equals led by a teacher of justice outside the centers of Israel, were characterized by their “service to one another.” And members of this community “did not practice having slaves (douloi), as they thought it could lead them to injustice; rather, as they lived by themselves they dealt with each other through service” (diakonia; Jos Ant. 18.21).

Pandemic crises as the church's context(s)

- › Throughout history the church had to undergo various kinds of pandemic crises—independently and, as in the world, together with the rest.
 - › pandemic of systemic persecution (cf. the book of Revelation)
 - › “famine over all the world during the reign of Claudius” (Acts 11,28ff.)
 - › Accordingly, the disciples, as much as each of them were (financially) able, decided to send something as support (or relief supply; Gk. diakonia) to the brothers [and sisters] in Judea. Then Barnabas and Saul (Paul) delivered the gathered financial relief to the elders (in Jerusalem). The idea “based on one’s capacity” is an interesting support campaign strategy. In another context, believers who were unable to put aside some amount due to own financial constraints went fasting for a day or two in order to come up with their own contribution (cf. Apology of Aristides [ca. 2nd cent. CE]; Shepherd of Hermas 54; 56).

Pandemic crises as the church's context(s)

- › The dreadful pandemics in the Middle Ages also remind us of the church's challenge to respond to the crisis courageously by taking care of those who are affected. How dreadful death could be as brought about by the pandemic is reflected in the poem of Geoffrey Chaucer, written ca. 1390 when a plague ravaged England.
 - › There came a privy thief, they call him Death,
 - › Who kills us all round here, and in a breath
 - › He's killed a thousand in the present plague,
 - › And, sir, it doesn't do to be too vague
 - › If you should meet him; you had best be wary.
 - › Be on your guard with such an adversary,
 - › Be primed to meet him everywhere you go,
 - › That's what my mother said. It's all I know.
 - › (from "The Pardoner's Tale," *The Canterbury Tales*)
- › Plague (of pestilence) in northern Germany in 1527
 - › Martin Luther's home practically became "a hospital".
 - › For him the authenticity of every Christian's love for the neighbors is tested in how they deal with the sick and grieving.

Pandemic crises as the church's context(s)

- › 1983 WCC Statement, occasioned by the HIV/AIDS pandemic:
 - › “Diakonia as the Church’s ministry of sharing, healing and reconciliation is of the very nature of the Church. It demands of individuals and churches a giving, which comes not out of what they have, but what they are. Diakonia constantly has to challenge the frozen, static, self-centered structures of the Church and transform them into living instruments of the sharing, healing ministry of the Church. Diakonia cannot be confined within the institutional framework. It should transcend the established structures and boundaries of the institutional church and become the sharing and healing action of the Holy Spirit through the community of God’s people in and for the world.”

Pandemic crises as the church's context(s)

- › The current disease pandemic has adversely affected practically all aspects of life—in politics, in church, and society. As a situationer, I would like to quote directly a portion of the editorial of a forthcoming *International Handbook on Ecumenical Diaconia*:
 - › “The immense vulnerability of humankind, the need and relevance of care for the sick and the dying, the tragic consequences of a neglect of health systems and underfinancing of public health, as well as the issues of social exclusion and inequality in terms of social security and accessibility of digital communication as well as public support – all of these point to core issues for churches engaged in Christian social services. . With the Corona Crisis we have thus entered into a new era of increased relevance of Diakonia, Public Health and Social Inclusion...”

Reflections

- The Covid-19 pandemic is an occasion for Christians to manifest in concrete ways the very essential nature of the church that is rooted in the diaconia and faithfulness of Jesus Christ. It is, however, not the pandemic or whatever forms of ordeal that define the church's being. Rather, it is her mission and diaconia that concretely convey what it means to be a church in times of pandemic crises. In what follows I offer some reflections on solidarity as my humble proposal with regard to the church's current struggle with the Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath (trusting that there will be an after of this crisis):
- 1. A Christian understanding of the mystical "body of Christ" invites today's churches to revitalize networks of churches/congregations in localities for mutual support and solidarity.

Reflections

- 2. Although the word “solidarity” does not occur in the letters of Paul (or in any biblical text), the notion of interdependency and interconnectivity of the elements of the one (mystical) body of Christ points to what we understand nowadays as solidarity, in its general sense,— something we may refer to as that deep sense of belonging to an entity that prods one to act in response to a perceived need by the sharing of material resources and time, as well as the provision of care. Attention is especially offered to the weak and marginalized:
 - “[T]he members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, (23) and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; (24) whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, (25) that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.” (1 Cor 12,22–25, NRSV)

Reflections

- 3. Gleaned from this text, the relationship between elements or parts of the body is not purely a subject-object (i.e., giver-receiver) relationship. I believe a biological description of such a relationship effectively applies—and that is “interaction” of integral elements within an organism—indeed, solidarity! Cultural anthropologically, we have an ancient (and still existing) custom in the Philippines called *bayanihan*, which approximates the idea of “active engagement in the community, faithfulness to common goals and interests, cooperation, selflessness and neighborliness” implied in our Biblical text. The term is used by the Philippine government in its measure to assist individuals and families that are heavily affected by the Covid19 pandemic.

Reflections

- 4. In line with the notion of solidarity, it appears that the church, esp. in times of pandemic crisis, also needs to continue cultivating theologies of pain and suffering that do not necessarily blame the victims.

- Patriarch (Filaret) of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church reportedly said that the present pandemic crisis is “God’s punishment for the sins of men, the sinfulness of humanity,” and by that he allegedly meant the “same-sex marriage”.

- Going back to Paul’s body metaphor, the rest of the body may blame the lungs for being weak in processing oxygen; and conversely, the lungs return the blame by saying that the hands are at fault for not following proper hygiene or health safety protocols, bringing infection to the whole body system.

Conclusion

- › For the interest of time I now conclude this presentation, having outlined a basic understanding of the nature of the church as the assembly of Christ's loyalists and her solidarity with the people in history, as well as some initial reflections of the church as an active, vibrant "body of Christ" manifesting a Christian ethic of solidarity in times of pandemic. There are, admittedly, many other themes and issues to deal with in our ongoing discussion. One is that of God's salvation in Christ that needs to be reflected on to include not only sinners who are invited to repent, but also those who suffer because of injustice inflicted on them. This can surely have implications for today's Christian ethic of solidarity, which ultimately finds affinities with a Christian ethic of protest and advocacy.

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Thank you very much for your kind attention.