

# Church **New** Communication in the **Normal**

*Perspectives from Asia and Beyond*



Anthony Le Duc, SVD  
Editor

**Church Communication  
in the New Normal  
Perspectives from Asia and Beyond**



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in the New Normal**  
**Perspectives from Asia and Beyond**

Edited by  
**Anthony Le Duc, SVD**



**Asian Research Center  
for Religion and Social Communication  
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## X CHURCH COMMUNICATION IN THE NEW NORMAL

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## FOREWORD

Shortly after the release of his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis wrote a book with the British Journalist, Austen Ivereigh, entitled *Let Us Dream: A Path to a Better Future*. Among the many profound insights in this book, two are particularly relevant to this present volume of articles on *Church Communication in the New Normal: Perspectives from Asia and Beyond*.

First, in the Prologue to his book, Pope Francis writes: “The question is whether you’re going to come through this crisis and if so, how. The basic rule of a crisis is that you don’t come out of it the same. If you get through it, you come out better or worse, but never the same.” In a certain sense, the articles in this volume exemplify the truth of this statement of Pope Francis. They all attempt to explore how things, particularly in the area of communication, can be done differently and better in the new normal. Indeed, they heed Pope Francis’ insight that the COVID-19 pandemic is actually a call to re-organize the way we live life and the way we do things in life. It would indeed be a mistake if, after all of this is over, we simply bracket off the experience of the pandemic, file it away and archive it, and then go back to where we left off and continue with life as before. Rather, the challenge is for us to treasure this experience and allow it to shape the way we live life from hereon. This is what the articles in this volume admirably attempt to do.

Secondly, in Part One of the book, Pope Francis states: “You have to go to the edges of existence if you want to see the world as it is. I’ve always thought that the world looks clearer from the periphery . . . . You have to make for the margins to find a new future.” And in Part Three of the book, he adds: “To embrace the margins is to expand our horizons, for we see more clearly and broadly from the edges of society.” This volume also exemplifies this approach to the construction of the new normal, that is, of seeing reality not from the center but from the periphery. Written by scholars from Asia or based in Asia, the articles in this volume are indeed an attempt to imagine a new world from

the perspective of the periphery of the developed world and of the Universal Church. Voices from such places as South Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, the Syro-Malabar Church, and even from indigenous peoples (e.g., the Australian Aborigines and the Kankanaeys in Northern Philippines) are made to resound in this volume, providing heretofore unconsidered perspectives for addressing global problems.

As such, then, this volume is a unique contribution to the building of a world of universal fraternity which, according to Pope Francis, is the Church's mission in the new normal. As Pope Francis puts it: "Fraternity is today our new frontier" (*Let Us Dream*, III). He adds: "Now is the time for ... a new humanism that can harness this eruption of fraternity, to put an end to the globalization of indifference and the hyperinflation of the individual. We need to feel again that we need each other, that we have a responsibility for others, including for those not yet born and for those not yet deemed to be citizens" (*Let Us Dream*, I). Further, he says: "To dream of a different future we need to choose fraternity over individualism as our organizing principle. Fraternity, the sense of belonging to each other and to the whole of humanity, is the capacity to come together and work together against a shared horizon of possibility" (*Let Us Dream*, II).

At the heart of this mission of fraternity is communication. For a world of human fraternity can only be built on the basis of a "culture of encounter." As Pope Francis puts it, "the process of building fraternity, be it local or universal, can only be undertaken by spirits that are free and open to authentic encounters" (FT 50). Further, he says: "In today's world, the sense of belonging to a single human family is fading, and the dream of working together for justice and peace seems an outdated utopia. What reigns instead is a cool, comfortable and globalized indifference .... Isolation and withdrawal into one's own interests are never the way to restore hope and bring about renewal. Rather, it is closeness; it is the culture of encounter. Isolation, no; closeness, yes. Culture clash, no; culture of encounter, yes" (FT 30).

But, aside from being a path to the building of fraternity, the culture of encounter—and, thus, communication—is actually a requirement of human nature. "Human beings are so made that they cannot live, develop and find

fulfilment except ‘in the sincere gift of self to others.’ Nor can they fully know themselves apart from an encounter with other persons: ‘I communicate effectively with myself only insofar as I communicate with others ....’ This is part of the mystery of authentic human existence. ‘Life exists where there is bonding, communion, fraternity; and life is stronger than death when it is built on true relationships and bonds of fidelity. On the contrary, there is no life when we claim to be self-sufficient and live as islands: in these attitudes, death prevails’” (FT 87).

Crucial, then, to the promotion of a culture of encounter and thus to the building of a world of fraternity is how communication is carried out in life. Communication must help build a world not on the basis of power, control, competition and the accumulation of wealth, but rather on tenderness, compassion, solidarity and the sharing of resources. This requires that communication be carried out in a new way—a way of communicating that is less aggressive, less coercive, less destructive, and more respectful, more humble, more courteous. This is precisely what this volume offers—an exploration into ways of communicating that truly build a world of human fraternity.

We owe a profound depth of gratitude to Anthony Le Duc, SVD, the editor of this volume, as well as its various contributors, for offering us a truly valuable resource for imagining life in the new normal, which I wholeheartedly recommend to everyone.

It responds to the appeal which Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, jointly made in the “Declaration on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together” which they signed together on February 4, 2019 in Abu Dhabi:

In the name of *human fraternity*, that embraces all human beings, unites them and renders them equal; In the name of this *fraternity* torn apart by policies of extremism and division, by systems of unrestrained profit or by hateful ideological tendencies that manipulate the actions and the future of men and women;... In the name of God and of everything stated thus far, [we] declare the adoption of a culture of dialogue as the



path; mutual cooperation as the code of conduct; reciprocal understanding as the method and standard. (FT 285)

Indeed, it is not only possible but necessary to build a world of universal fraternity. As the recently concluded SIGNIS World Congress 2022 states: “We believe that it is possible to build a new society by creating awareness that inspires us to work together in peace with people of different cultures, beliefs, religions, and ideologies.

May this volume inspire the creation of a culture of dialogue and encounter toward the building of a world of universal fraternity.

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# ENDORSEMENTS

COVID-19 has devastated many Asian countries causing untold deaths and destroying their economies and social relations, especially among the poor, who could not have access to vaccines. The virus has also severely disturbed the rhythm of Church life, particularly in worship and daily Christian activities. While the pandemic is still causing long-term havoc in Asia, it has introduced a ‘new normal’ into the continent. *Church Communication in the New Normal*, a collection of essays written by Asian social scientists, theologians, and pastoral agents, is the first volume that deals with how the Church in Asia can resume its prophetic mission, liturgical worship, and pastoral ministry in times of pandemic and post-pandemic. I enthusiastically recommend this volume, a fruit of profound scholarship and pastoral sensitivity, not only to all who live and work in Asia but also to those living on other continents, both Christians and followers of other religions, who work for human flourishing.

*Peter C. Phan*

*The Ignacio Ellacuria Chair of Catholic Social Thought, Georgetown University, USA*

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This fascinating volume helpfully combines compelling case studies of the Church responses to the pandemic from throughout Asia with analyses examining the opportunities and challenges offered by the pandemic both to Church communication and to the self-understanding of the Church. It should be essential reading for pastoral ministers, scholars, and communication officers.

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The COVID-19 pandemic has become a historical event with a distinct ‘before’ and ‘after.’ After COVID-19, in our new normal, we understand and speak of certain experiences now in a different way. Religious communal experiences, including worship, fellowship and pastoral care are among these experiences. Before the pandemic, those invested in pastoral communication and its practices often had to make the case that the communicative aspects of faith and ministry matter profoundly and integrally. In our new normal after COVID-19, we have seen that the communication of faith makes tremendous difference in faith, ministry and communal religious experience overall. When during COVID-19 our experiences of community were conveyed through live-streamed gatherings, this fact became crystallized. *Church Communication in the New Normal* does timely and important scholarly work exploring the across-the-board emergence of faith communication as an essential aspect of ministry. Using COVID-19 as an overall case study, each chapter of *Church Communication in the New Normal* demonstrates the integral role of communication in the way a community of faith gathers, worships and extends care. The book also showcases creative directions for ministry in light of the pandemic experience, all the while rooting the study contextually across a variety of cultural locations both distinct but common, especially from the perspective of faith. This book is an essential addition to global scholarly reflection on pastoral communication.

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# INTRODUCTION

*Anthony Le Duc, SVD*

It must be stated at the outset that all the chapters in this book were researched and written during the coronavirus pandemic which made its first appearance in the Chinese province of Wuhan in the waning days of 2019, then making its way to every continent of the world bringing upheavals and calamities to countries and peoples in multiple successive waves. In fact, some of the chapters were written at a time when the pandemic was raging or regaining momentum in the country where the author was residing, wreaking untold havoc on the lives and the livelihood of the people. By the time this book is published, it is likely that in many countries, the pandemic is still rampant or is re-surg-ing with a new wave and a new strain, infecting even those who have been triple or quadruple vaccinated. And despite some countries having declared COVID-19 endemic in order to move beyond the pandemic mentality which can be debilitating economically, socially, and psychologically, this book does not make any pretense at claims of clarity due to divinely endowed wisdom or the benefit of hindsight. Any assertion of clarity, if there is such a thing, would have to wait months and even years from the scheduled publication of this volume to have any credibility.

Having said that, one of the extraordinary gifts of human beings is the ability to simultaneously experience the present, while reflecting on the past and gazing towards the future – synthesizing all the dimensions of life – temporal, spatial, and spiritual – into a logical and meaningful narrative that can serve as a foundation and inspiration for individual and communal self-understanding and plans of action. Indeed, the task of sense-making does not take place only on a personal level; we also have the ability to reflect collectively, thus benefitting from group wisdom and reducing risks of parochialism, myopism, extremism, and the countless other negative ‘isms’ that assert themselves when there is a lack of dialogue and mutual sharing of ideas, experiences, and aspirations. We also fall into this trap when the individual human mind is allowed too freely to ruminate without the necessary restraints – self-imposed or otherwise.

Thus, it is with this goal of gathering the fruits of individual and group reflections that the work of creating this volume was initiated and carried out – not as a systematic study of the theme of this book, rather a combination of puzzle pieces that contribute to unveiling an extremely complex and grand picture of a world undergoing unprecedented changes and of humanity attempting to cope with what has been labeled perhaps in a clichéd manner as the ‘new normal.’ Despite this expression resurfacing in popular culture and being widely applied to the state of the world brought about by the pandemic, what exactly characterizes this new normal in the present, what it will ultimately look like in the days to come, and how long it will take for a newer normal to replace the present one remain issues that not many people have examined in a systematic way. On the other hand, one is not sure that any such attempt will yield anything more than well-reasoned conjectures. The truth is while human beings would like to believe that we can control the directions of global developments through our carefully devised sustainability goals and admirable scientific and technological ingenuities, the SARS-Cov-2 virus that gave us the COVID-19 pandemic reminded us that a tiny biotic creature invisible to the naked eye and can readily mutate to ensure its chances of survival can throw a gigantic monkey wrench into all our meticulously thought-out five-year and ten-year plans.

Despite the wide-ranging topics presented in this collection, this volume takes ‘communication’ as the keyword for the various research and reflections on the life and mission of the Catholic Church during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as post-crisis. The reader will readily recognize that what is referred to as ‘communication’ here is an extremely elastic and multi-dimensional category. Within the context of the Church, particularly as discussed in this book, communication refers to words and images that the Church transmits to the faithful and to the world to help the people cope with issues brought about by the crisis. This communication helps contextualize these dramatic events in sound theological principles which need to again and again be creatively restated and reaffirmed with every human happening, both big and small, that takes place. Second, communication also refers to pastoral and evangelizing actions carried out by the Church and its members to sustain the life of the Church amid the grave situation of imposed isolation, pastors and members of the flock succumbing to COVID-19, shuttered church doors, and unlit altar candles. Third, communication refers to the models and strategies by the Church and its leaders to employ technological means to promote ecclesial communion, nourish the faith life of the people, and to dialogue with individuals and groups

to create a truly synodal Church. Finally, communication also refers to ways that the Church discerns and engages with the signs of the times in order to transform raw experiences into valuable lessons, human suffering into salvific grace, and pandemic isolation and division into greater post-pandemic interculturality, interdependence, and collaboration.

In this book, the chapters are divided into two parts (with some observable overlaps). The first part presents a set of larger theological, missiological, and pastoral issues that have been highlighted by the coronavirus pandemic. In Chapter One, we recognize that communication begins first and foremost with God who reveals God's self to humanity throughout history and continues to do so in contemporary global, local, and personal events. Gnaana Patrick reflects in this chapter questions concerning theodicy and proposes that it is perhaps now time to go beyond them and look theologically into how we may endeavour to seek and experience God who communicates and reveals God's self in the ongoing present in an empowering way. Such an endeavour can be more meaningfully undertaken in and through practical theologies as expressed in pastoral actions of solidarity with the victims to alleviate their sufferings; it can also be meaningfully undertaken in the Asian context as theological reflections, bringing insights emerging from different religious traditions of Asia into creative conversations.

In Chapter Two, Norman Melchor R. Peña Jr reflects on the words of Christ in his last moments on the cross and highlights the correlative resonance between this Christological experience and the experience of communication in the new normal. Peña Jr demonstrates that these utterances of Christ can serve as a guiding beacon to how religious communication can be effectuated as humanity undergoes a reality that reflects that of Christ on the cross. In the unfolding events of the world, Christ's last words never die but continue to live inspiring a sevenfold praxis of hope: 1) entreaty, 2) disclosure, 3) relationship, 4) isolation, 5) exigency, 6) fulfillment, and 7) entrustment. Each relates with narrative experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic inviting persons not only to approach communication as a process of transmission but as semiotics offering newfound meanings and significance. Here communication never fails as listeners focus on the self-significance of the message. Religious communication enables people to seek what is best for those who receive the message and centers on how they could grow not only in faith but likewise as human beings who bear God's image and likeness.

In Chapter Three, Christina Kheng discusses the Church's approach to missionary communication and highlights the need for paradigm shifts

associated with the Church's assumed role, priorities, language, epistemology, and partnerships. Kheng proposes that the search for meaning and values prompted by the coronavirus pandemic and other crises plaguing humanity calls for missionary communication to transition from preaching to promoting a journey of enquiring together, from maintenance to missionary outreach, from exclusive to universal languages for divine truths, from theoretical discourse to contemplation, and from unilateral action to pro-active collaboration.

In Chapter Four, Lazar T. Stanislaus addresses the theme of the book from the perspective of intercultural communication and proposes interculturality as an appropriate approach to responding to a changing world due to globalization, migration, and trans-nationalization. As society is well on its way from being monocultural to multicultural, adopting interculturality means undergoing a series of conversion from negative tendencies such as ethnocentrism, egoism, narrow nationalism, consumerism, and triumphalism to more inclusive worldviews that include being willing to engage in interreligious dialogue, being open to other peoples, and caring for creation.

In Chapter Five, Robert Kisala discusses the importance of interreligious dialogue to address the negative impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on interreligious relations globally in addition to already existing tensions pre-pandemic time. Kisala asserts that in the post-pandemic period, religious actors will be called upon to play a leading role in addressing some of the problems that have been highlighted during the pandemic. The interreligious dialogue agenda will include such tasks as promoting sound public policy that serves the common good, battling scapegoating and a conspiratorial mindset, building solidarity in order to address societal disparities, and preservation of the environment.

In Chapter Six, Michael Q. Nguyen calls attention to the prophetic communicative role of the SARS-CoV-2 virus in warning about the immediate and long-term dangers of human neglect in caring for creation. The presence of the coronavirus forced human beings away from the streets, the skies, and out of natural places, thus providing a brief but clearly observable change to the quality of the environment. However, this respite is far from adequate and not nearly the 're-set' that many people were hoping for. For long-term and lasting improvements in the ecology, changes need to take place within the human person, which means that human beings must undergo an ecological conversion. Nguyen proposes that the human-creation model of 'Master and Slave' must be replaced with the model of 'Shepherd and Sheep.' In this model, the Church becomes a Green Church that extends 'caritas' to all of creation,

and is imbued with the sense of interconnectedness as exemplified by the life of Francis of Assisi and the Australian Aborigines.

In Chapter Seven, Anthony Le Duc examines the communicative role of religious leaders during the coronavirus crisis with particular attention to the use of digital social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. The study shows that religious communication during the pandemic was multi-dimensional, serving to: 1) communicate personal presence of the religious leader; 2) communicate sound theological and spiritual wisdom to the faithful; 3) communicate divine presence through religious rituals; 4) communicate useful and correct information to the public; and 5) communicate examples of proper behavior. The author argues that this multi-dimensional communicative role is unique to the position of the religious leader who is not only respected by their adherents but also by the wider public. Therefore, it is imperative that religious leaders continue to explore ways to exercise digital leadership by utilizing various communicative channels to fulfill this role in the present and future in order to promote *ad intra* and *ad extra* religious harmony and solidarity, as well as providing social and spiritual nourishment to people under their care.

In Chapter Eight, Leo-Martin Angelo R. Ocampo analyzes the use and meaning of online liturgies by the Church to provide the faithful with continual spiritual nourishment during enforced lockdowns and social distancing measures promulgated by governmental authorities. The chapter traces the historical evolution of remote participation in liturgy in the Catholic Church from radio to the Internet parallel with the development of the Church's official stance. It then gathers the experience of online liturgies during the pandemic in both its positive and negative aspects. Finally, it attempts to articulate and begin to unfold some questions for liturgical teleparticipation in view of the new normal.

The second part of the book focuses on a number of local contexts as the Church deals with the impact of the pandemic and gathers lessons for the future. In Chapter Nine, Rico C. Jacoba explores the changes to the concept of 'neighborhood' as a result of digital technological development and internet use, which became intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. Neighborhood is where relationships are formed, nurtured, and sustained through social and religious engagement and support. The Church's presence and effective faith communication at the level of the neighborhood is necessary for the Church to survive and thrive despite challenges, even those as serious as the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to presenting how neighborhoods changed over time



until the present global crisis, the author also presents how Church leaders can exercise creativity to respond to the spiritual needs of the neighborhood Church.

In Chapter Ten, Anthony Quyen Huy Nguyen examines the reality of the pandemic in the Vietnamese context and proposes ‘prophetic dialogue with realities’ as the pastoral communication approach that can be implemented by the Church in Vietnam to address present dilemmas as well as future challenges. Realities are by nature complex and various problems cannot be solved quickly. Thus, prophetic dialogue requires commitment and courage, but also a good dose of patience. Unlike vaccines, dialogue is a dynamic and ever-evolving process in which various participants faithfully engage with each other – not a do-it-yourself or a quick fix to the world’s ailments.

In Chapter Eleven, Ignatius Minsoo Kim discusses the Church’s pastoral directions based on his own pastoral experience as well as analysis of several surveys conducted by the Church in South Korea during the early stages of the pandemic in this country. Kim argues that based on the reality of the speed of technological development and its incorporation into human lives, especially of the young people, the events of the pandemic that caused accelerated use of digital media for Church communication and celebrations, and openness of the faithful towards further incorporation of digital communication technologies into the activities of the Church, the directions of pastoral ministry in Korea needs to follow a model that centers on the integration of both online and offline dimensions in a cohesive manner.

In Chapter Twelve, Brandon Billan Cadingpal explores the role of traditional cultural elements in helping to inform the people about contemporary events in human life and become resources to cope with crisis in a meaningful, effective, and unique way. Specifically, Cadingpal studies the pandemic coping experience of the Kankanaeys in the Philippines through their adaptation of the traditional ‘*Tengan*’ practice and the utilization of associated traditional values ingrained in the Kankanaey culture. The author argues that the pandemic experience of the Kankanaeys serves to highlight the significance and the adaptability of traditional cultural elements and values in dealing with modern-day issues faced by individuals and groups.

In Chapter Thirteen, Robin Xavier, Mariot Jose Panjikaran, Angel Treasa Alex, and Nandini Lakshmikantha investigate the usage of online platforms for religious communication by the Syro-Malabar Catholic community in Kerala, India, particularly during and in the post pandemic situations. By analyzing the results of a series of surveys, the authors conclude that the COVID-19

pandemic gave rise to an induced online religion, which was transient and showed signs of ebbing as the pandemic became less intense. While the community still pose notable resistance against accommodating online religion, the authors observe that there is a surge in the religion online practices, and it could be deemed as a positive sign in the pastoral communication efforts to reach all the groups that comprise the Church.

In Chapter Fourteen, John Patrick Murray reflects on the topic of ecclesial communion through his own experience with the expatriate church community in Bangkok, Thailand. Murray sees the benefit of the pandemic in highlighting the existing strengths and weaknesses of a society and any system within it. This proved so for this faith community with its pre-existing condition of weak communication structures. During a pandemic, communication became more important than ever. When a faith community can no longer gather, it exists within a rarefied atmosphere where the normal and accepted communication structures could no longer be taken for granted. The chapter presents the author's reflection on what has been happening so as to help proceed in a more purposeful way to build up life based on the held belief that a new and better era would arise from this pandemic. This belief is a key tenet held by Pope Francis for the future of the Church in a post-pandemic world. It is no simple returning to life as it was.

In Chapter Fifteen, John Mishen and Anthony Le Duc explore the creative ways in which pastoral agents from various countries around the world employ information and communication technology (ICT) in order to overcome the limitations imposed upon their normal ministry by the reality of the pandemic and to respond to the urgent need for spiritual and social support from the people. Despite the inspirational and creative ways that pastoral agents employed ICT to carry on their work in extremely difficult situations, the authors believe that ICT was often turned to in a reflexive manner, without adequate prior training, and without the necessary examination of pastoral and theological implications of the practices. Thus, as the Church moves on from the pandemic, its leaders and pastoral agents need to process and reflect on this issue in a more systematic manner to discover effective and theologically sound directions in making use of digital technology to sustain and nourish the life of the Church.

In Chapter Sixteen, Trong Quang Pham discusses the need for devising a systematic and ongoing hospital chaplaincy program in Vietnam, where most hospitals and clinics are under the control of the communist government that looks at religions with great wariness and suspicion. Therefore, hospital

chaplaincy in Vietnam tends to be informal, despite the availability of many priests, religious, and lay volunteers who are willing to engage in this ministry. However, during one of the most intense waves of the pandemic in Vietnam causing hospitals to be overwhelmed and medical staff stretched thin, the government allowed for Catholic pastoral agents to serve as volunteers in these facilities. Pham believes that this positive experience may serve as the impetus for future collaboration between the Church and the government in Vietnam in order to implement a hospital chaplaincy program that would supplement the medical treatments already received by patients.

Chapter Seventeen, authored by Vince Henry M. Salles, is the final contribution to this volume. In this chapter, Salles presents the communicative role of the chaplains as articulated by four priests from the Order of Saint Camillus in the Philippines. Based on extensive interviews with the chaplains, the author analyzes and presents the communicative strategies that the chaplains employed to minister to patients, families, and hospital workers. Despite multiple limitations imposed upon them by hospital safety protocols, the chaplains were able to exercise their multi-dimensional roles as listeners, liturgists, counselors, comforters, and accompanists. In terms of post-pandemic implications, the author believes that the chaplaincy experience during this crisis could serve as source of valuable lessons that help to discover best practices and new directions for training future hospital chaplains.

Finally, what we can see in this volume is that all the contributors are either writing from Asia or are Asian even if they are living in another part of the world, e.g., Europe or the United States. Asians, however, are part of the global Church, and discussions are not limited to the local situation alone. While Part Two of the book focuses largely on specific Asian geographical contexts, Part One presents discussions and reflections that concern the Church as a whole. What this eclectic set of research presentations demonstrates is that boundaries only exist as a human mental construct and much more fragile than we would like to believe. The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly proved that no matter how much we try to impose borders around localities and countries or isolate ourselves from one another, these measures of separation can be easily breached by the coronavirus. The insistence on maintaining strict isolation and confinement oftentimes only resulted in greater suffering and frustration. The life of the Church is the same. The local Church finds its full meaning in relations to the universal Church, and the universal Church carries out its mission with people not in an air-tight vacuum but in specific circumstances and places. As the Church strains forward in the new normal with its losses,

grief, uncertainties, and challenges, it is my hope that the discussions on Church communication in this book reflect this spirit of looking for greater meaning in particular events, searching for a long-term vision from the present, and turning ongoing experience into transforming lessons.