

**INDIAN THEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION (ITA)  
STATEMENT 2022**

**Pandemic Challenges to the Indian Church  
An Indian Theological Response**

1. We, the members of the Indian Theological Association (ITA) convened for the 44<sup>th</sup> Annual Meet and Conference from 26-29 April 2022, at the National Biblical Catechetical and Liturgical Centre (NBCLC), Bangalore:560084 have deliberated the theme: *Pandemic Challenges to the Indian Church, A Theological Response* as the whole humanity struggles to cope with the ominous Corona Pandemic which has verily become endemic now, and has indeed frustrated and devastated the rhythm and harmony of life in a mammoth way world-wide.
2. The distressing Pandemic has seemingly unsettled and even silently interrogated the very text and texture of the faith presumptions and perspectives that God has sent own son so that the world might have life, a life in abundance. As the pandemic breaths death extensively, and humans find themselves in a depressive desolation, the people silently resign in their disparaging moments that the world has become a world without God; the very talk of God is apparently drained of its relevance, agenda, and teleology; needless to say, theological discourses and debates look irrelevant; they have silently lost their charm and élan in the public perceptions and conversations by default.
3. It is in this precarious but challenging scenario that forty Indian theologians of the ITA resolved to foster the theological fellowship to regain and reassert the import of theological conversation to take on the overwhelming threat of Corona virus, and reclaim the relevance of the enduring theological conversation even though the assertion of virulent Corona prolongs itself in variant forms and deviant shades. It is our collective conviction and shared consciousness that the onslaught of Corona virus can be contained and converted into a new resource and recourse of enhancement and empowerment in the further evolution of humanity in the wisdom and vision of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, of which the inherent empowering theme is the wholeness and fullness of life despite of the fact that the demonic forces against life and its manifestations have been ever operative either overtly or covertly from time immemorial.
4. In fact, the real import of Jesus' Gospel verily spins out in the matrix of confrontation between the forces of life and death. Jesus' Gospel which is seeded in "the God ...of the living" (Mk 12:27) is abundantly resourceful to rely upon while taking on the disease and death unleashed by the Covid. In the Old Testament, the Psalmist figures out God as the "fountain of life" (Ps 36:9); God, like a good shepherd, leads the people to green pastures of abundance of life (Ps 23:1ff); such an image resonates with the Old Testament's understanding of a God who is coterminous with history through the dynamic of covenantal partnership with humans both in their triumphs and tragedies. The very mission of theological conversation is to reimagine and reinterpret the bond between the divine and the dusty in new convincing narratives and metaphors in the traumatic Pandemic times.
5. The compelling trust in the dispensation of the Biblical revelation is obviously that the humans are, never, ever, orphaned in its fight against the forces, hostile to life. It is our conscientious conviction that theological conversation textured in a profound faith in the

Lord of Life would be a veritable and a relevant exercise to uphold a 'holy optimism' (Karl Rahner) in the thick of the uncertainty and precarity unleashed by the pandemic. Moreover, the fundamental stream of consciousness permeating in the Biblical narrative is that it is through the mystery of the cross, the mystery of life is unfolded and celebrated; the empty tomb evolves into the womb of new life and new light in the Christian paradox!

6. The agony and anguish unleashed by the pandemic, if it is interpreted in the Christic redemptive love and vision, will churn out to a new enduring resource of solidarity, service and succour for a greater cohesion and collaboration of humans in its trust with destiny. Indeed, it is evidently the ardent trust in Jesus, the *Eschatos* ("the first fruit of Resurrection) in whom "we live, move and have our being" (Acts 17:28) in our Eschatological pilgrimage; the Risen Christ becomes evidently the ultimate referral in the current Pandemic paranoia as we seek to understand our faith (*Fides quaerens intellectum*) in a telos of hope that "God may be everything to everyone" (1Cor 15:28) always and forever. The Pandemic, thus, offers us a challenging scenario to revisit our faith and make it more competitive and credible so much so that our trust in the Gospel is reinvigorated with a new intensity and momentum in a perspective in the present context of uncertainty and vulnerability.

#### **Pandemic *Per Se* and *De Facto***

7. The pandemic Covid 19 has been the most challenging crisis that the world has faced since the Second World War. It has been a global health catastrophe that has alarmingly inflicted and disastrously frustrated all aspects and layers of human life worldwide in a seemingly irretrievable manner. It infected more than 650 million people and took the life of more than 6 million people all over the world (see, WHO Coronavirus, Dashboard); the economic loss is roughly calculated 4 trillion US dollars (<https://unctad.org/news/global-economy>).
8. In the case of India, the pandemic infected 44314618 people and there were 5, 27253 deaths due to the Covid till August 2022(<https://covid19.who.int/region/searo/country/in>); but the actual death could be more than the official figures. Besides, the abrupt lockdowns imposed after the outbreak of the pandemic in India brought enormous hardship to teeming labourers: contractual labourers in cities (mostly migrants), unskilled and semi-skilled employees, and the self-employed; especially in the absence of transportation and food hundreds died on the roads while returning on foot in scorching sun to their villages thousands of miles away. Strangely, the Government was a stoic spectator without rendering any helping hand in their plight.
9. COVID-19 has been unparalleled in human experience because of its pattern of infection, magnitude of spread, and the absence of the resource intensive response that it demands. Many factors led to the outbreak of COVID-19, namely, the increasing proximity between humans and animals, climate change and biodiversity loss, globalisation with its associated mobility across borders, the transport of plants and animals to alien habitats, and the penchant for 'exotic' foods.
10. When the virus struck, the first and urgent concern has been to contain the spread of the disease. Nations, however, needed time to evolve a system of containment, treatment and prevention. For the most, a lockdown became an inevitable choice. This unexpected disruption of social life for a prolonged period affected everyone, irrespective of whether

they contracted the disease or not. The non-linearity of events with an unpredictable link between cause and effect resulted in uncertainty and chaos, giving rise to what Jamais Cascio calls, a BANI (Brittle, Anxious, Non-linear, Incomprehensible) world.

11. Apart from the medical aspect of the Pandemic, the economic concerns were foremost; for millions in India the lockdown brought a choice between loss of livelihood and the risk of contracting COVID-19 both of which were matter life or death especially for the daily wage workers. They have found themselves in an inextricable existential dilemma with which they have been compelled to live along.
12. The psychological trauma like fear, anxiety, despondency, meaningless etc., has shredded the collective confidence and proactivity to the very life *de facto* and *per se*. Accompanying feelings of shame, isolation, and hopelessness, the inability to seek support and the lack of understanding by others, has led to irreparable mental disorders and health issues. Regular media updates of COVID-19 deaths and the exponential increase in the number of cases have caused tremendous anguish among people. The thought of contracting the disease and being hospitalised in isolation, and perhaps even dying alone, have added to the stress, anxiety, powerlessness and vulnerability.
13. Those with co-morbidities or disabilities, or requiring palliative care, would have felt abandoned, as resources for other priority like healthcare systems have been diverted for Covid-19. Along with the elderly they have become a high-risk group that has been isolated at home, thereby increasing their feeling of alienation, desolation and abandonment.
14. Children have been another risk group. Denied physical and social space the long-term impact of the lockdown on them has yet to be determined. Much would depend on their socio-economic background.
15. There has been a situation like "house arrest" at home; it has given rise to new disparaging subtleties that have exposed the myth that the home is a safe place for all. By default, the curve of domestic violence turned upward. The data of several countries show that not only the quantum of crime and *violence increased*, but the use of weapons in criminal acts has been widespread. 'Family' suicides have escalated. Odd time meetings, disregard for public holidays and the encroachment of personal and family time have become an upsetting routine. All of this would definitely have long-term social and mental health consequences.
16. To elaborate the Covid distress, as consumers have gone online to cope with the restriction on movement, vendors and services without digital skills have been left behind. Remote work too has emphasized a shift to new skills. Up skilling however, has been neither accessible nor affordable to many. To phrase differently, the Covid has thoroughly frustrated the labour-intensive development; thereby, it has widened the gap between the haves and haves-not, and accelerated a downward spiral into poverty.
17. Moreover, the online education has brought its own version of distress and unrest among the families. The poor have been neither able to afford digital devices nor have access to consistent internet connections; the children of the marginalized are, by and large, denied of education due to online inefficiency and illiteracy; thereby existing inequalities are

further widened and deepened to the danger of serious consequence in the future. Thus, the Pandemic has, by default, engendered disastrous impacts on larger systemic and structural issues from the point of social, cultural and economic life apart from its inherent medical implications.

18. Nevertheless, the Pandemic has brought a scenario in which the inexhaustible potential of the collective goodness of humans through solidarity and unreserved service is unleashed on different domains of human life; people have displayed their abundant generosity by way of the supply of food and medicine free of cost; individuals, institutions, industrial and commercial establishments and Govt. agencies have been competing in this regard.
19. In this connection the yeomen service rendered by the health workers and doctors should immensely be recognized and appreciated during this harrowing Pandemic times despite of the fact that they have often been subjected to long hours of caring for those infected by the virus, and forced to stay away from home due to public anxiety resulting in stigmatised behaviour of family and neighbours. Hundreds of nurses, health workers and doctors have sacrificed their lives while rendering their service to the Pandemic patients. The ITA pays homage immensely to these men and women of goodness and goodwill, who have offered their precious lives for the cause of the Pandemic, and registers the indebtedness and gratitude to them unreservedly.
20. The altruistic dimensions of human goodness and collective commitment towards Common Good have fabulously been at play during this Pandemic challenge. Social, Economic, Political, Cultural and even Religious 'Capital' have latently been operative in a phenomenal way especially in the matters of the sharing of the capital and the medical informatics regarding the disease without any reserve. The collaborative interactions and networking among local and global agencies and the spontaneous political support irrespective of diverse political stances and ideologies have been prodigious that the spread of the Pandemic could be contained in remarkable way. The human resources and potentials have been channelized in a global solidarity so that adequate health care, availability of digital technologies in the matters of monitoring the spread of the disease, supply of medicine, the needed care etc., are facilitated in a tremendous sense of service, empathy and solidarity.
21. Though the Pandemic has been disastrous and frustrated all the domains and layers of social, economic, religious and cultural, health and educational structures of human life, it has engendered a new sense of human camaraderie and synergic cohesion in the world politics and global order. It brought a new awareness that calamities like pandemic could ingeniously be fought in the profound sense of global solidarity in which inherent human connaturality with goodness and commitment for common good have spontaneously been functional.
22. Obviously, a conscientious awareness that the humans are cosmic beings and that there exists an inviolable bond between them and the creation has irretrievably emerged in the collective awareness of the humans as the common enemy has to be encountered; there is only a very thin line between human health and planet's life. Needless to say, the prosperity of the posterity is inextricably and intricately interwoven in the web of correlations and mutuality between the humans and the whole creation. This renewed understanding of the cosmic, ecological dimension of human life would be a veritable resource to spin a new imagination, and to indulge in an innovative creativity for the

humans in their rendezvous with the epiphany of the whole existence; it engenders a new inclusive awareness that ‘wholly is holy’.

23. In sum, the Covid has convincingly taught the humans that a synergic solidarity seeded in the inherent goodness of humans and commitment to common good is enormously resourceful to transcend as well as transform the human made frontiers and barriers in the name of politics, religion, ideology etc. while combating the devastating scenario like the endemic Pandemic. Obviously, the phenomenon of Covid has irrevocably instilled a gut confidence and collective commitment in the shared consciousness of the global community to brace up whatsoever future catastrophes might be; secondly, the Pandemic has offered a new platform and horizon that our pilgrimage on the mother earth is to be creatively conceived, crafted and choreographed in friendship with the Creation: the ‘burning bush’ of the Divine on ‘holy-ground’!
24. A revolutionary shift of perception and awareness has happened that the humans are ecological to the core and humans are only a spec in ecosystem of whole existence; the Pandemic has indisputably has taught us humans that any imbalance inflicted on Creation owing to human greed and hubris would be self-inflictive and suicidal. It all should gear us to a convincing resolve that henceforth, the narrative of the vulnerable human life is to be imagined and to be lived out in an irreversible covenantal partnership with God’s creation of which humans are only trustees on the one hand and are existential constituents on the other; there has emerged irrefutably a universal consensus that the humans are fundamentally ecological beings textured in the five elements (*panchabhutas*) and are part and parcel of the inexhaustible inherent resources ever sustained by the economy of recycling. The mystery of creation, its preservation and restoration (*shristi-stithi-samhara*) is encrypted in the processual ecosystem of Reality, which has neither an *initium* nor *finis* in the vision and wisdom of the Lord of Life.
25. The covenantal connect and contour with the Creation should have to be the new in source and insight of the humans in their conversation with their vocation as well as destiny. This newly awakened ecological inclusion of human identity and the social, cultural and political solidarity of humans in correspondence with the Divine must have to become the veritable and vivacious coordinates of theological conversations henceforth; such a perspective curve and turn would engender and procure a new credibility, competence and conviction in the theological conversations and discourses in the public reasoning, inter-religious fellowships and personal journeys.

### **Biblical Appropriation**

26. There exists, *de facto*, a faith imperative that the theological conversation in the scenario of the Pandemic should be entertained in correspondence with the insights and praxes of the People of God who have traversed through catastrophes like the Covid. No doubt, the theological musings would procure a new reasoning and embrace a teleological perspective if we revisit the way Jews of exilic times ridden with historic crisis, and the sequent trauma of the people of God as they have utterly entrusted themselves in the providence and protection of the ‘God of the Hosts’. Undoubtedly, one can infer new insights in the Prophet Ezekiel’s response to the exilic events and his teachings towards how to interpret such tragic events in the overall unity and vision of the Biblical dispensation. We see, in the series of following events, the devastation inflicted upon the religious and spiritual realms of Jewish life despite the promises, the covenant and the assurance of YHWH: the Babylonians conquered the land that God had gifted to the Jews

and they were expelled from it; the descendant of David was dethroned and deported; the temple had been defiled and destroyed and proper worship was not possible.

27. Thus, the events surrounding the Babylonian exile, by and large, have displayed the failure of the divine promises, and of the covenant itself. Not a single institution has offered protection, security and meaning to the lives of the Jews; all their customary theologies looked inadequate and not convincing to deal with the distress that has prevailed as they have been uprooted from their ancestral land cruelly and brutally.
28. The responses of the Jewish community and its leaders have been diverse. While some evaded or avoided the crisis, others have struggled to face it with honesty and creativity. Some prophets and priests responded with a hypocritical mind while Ezekiel and Jeremiah fearlessly spoke against hypocrisy and offered 'hope' (Eze 13:2). Jeremiah accused the prophets for misrepresenting their own thoughts, feelings and dreams as divine instructions (Jer 23:16; 25-26). Ezekiel responded to the Babylonian catastrophe with truthfulness and hope.
29. Through figurative presentations Ezekiel (Judah and young woman Prostitute), instead of whitewashing the failures, exposed them critically and have interpreted the events in a perspective, without being estranged from the Biblical presumptions and perspectives. Ezekiel offered hope not as an escape from disaster, but rather as a resurgence from the devastation of catastrophe (Eze 37, 1-14). The vision of the Valley of Dry Bones shows us that the exiles have been in despair, without any hope. God would have asked questions: Could these bones live? (Eze 37, 3). It has been by the prophet's prophecy that the dry bones have been revived; it is the gut hope when all human hopes fail. The optimism of the prophet has not been that of closing his eyes to the present reality, but which has emerged when one has felt the dissolution of all hope. In Ezekiel's view, the lost land, the destroyed kingdom, the lost Davidic dynasty, and the destroyed temple would all be renovated and restored eventually (Eze 37: 25-28) as the vision of the Old Testament does not envisage the future space empty and void but a divine spectrum ridden with God's covenantal promises and blessings. This inherent and prevailing hope in the religious consciousness of the Israel has not been a hope for a mere restoration but for the re-construction of a new reality.
30. In the narrative of the prophet Jeremiah a new theological referral and construct have been knitted while appropriating the exile trauma in the Old Testament dispensation. He has spoken of substituting the temple with an interior religion (Jer31:33). He has discoursed the new covenant which would be written in the hearts; religion has been depicted in the reasoning of the heart - an inner experience. The exile experience has engendered an innovative style of worship of the people: shift from temple-centered worship to the Torah. Adherence to Torah has become a veritable alternative to the temple sacrifice. Most scholars have placed the origin of synagogues in exilic times. Thus, community prayer, and worship as the people of God have developed with informal domestic gatherings centered around Torah; gradually the synagogues have emerged. Thus, a people centric institution has emerged and they have been instrumental to sustain and foster the Jewish religious life in the absence of the Temple. Eventually, synagogues have become people centric vital space in the religious praxis as well as deliberations of Judaism; thus, crisis has turned out to be the cradle of new initiatives, creative deliberations and discourses in the narrative of Judaism.

31. Babylonian exile has been the defining era that Jewish religion has faced. It has been from this crisis that all the major pillars of later Judaism have evolved. We can appropriate a lot from the way the exilic community which has embraced creative and innovative ways to take on the crisis. Many people's initiatives taken during Covid resonate the exilic community's alternative faith praxes and even religious constructs. The promising development happened during the distressful Covid times is that the Church has reinvented 'domestic-churches'; such a turn-out has not at all schemed on premeditated agenda; rather, it has been spontaneous and living epiphanies of ardent faith deep down in the unconscious of the faithful. It is the creative outburst of *sensus fidei*. The silent as well as salient shift happening in these experiments at the initiative of the people of God in the domestic domains is from an *ecclesia docens* (teaching church) to an *ecclesia discerns* (the learning church); thereby the Church has become more people centric and the people have become vital agencies of living faith communities which have earnestly engaged in the "work of faith" and "labor of love" (1Thes 1:3) right in the public space; the faithful have been motivated by a nostalgic remembrance of early Christians who have constructed their identity and witness through *Eucharistia: Leitourgia – means -Koinonia, Diaconia and Martyria*.
32. The Covid situation offered a new horizon and platform for the people to interrogate prevalent hierarchical structures and their efficacy to take on situations similar to Covid genre. The Covid has thus played a prophetic role by default. It has highlighted the priorities of Christian life instead of being entangled in the inconsequential issues. Moreover, the Covid has challenged the existing understanding of the church leadership which is, by and large, hierarchical. The Covid has indisputably brought the true idea of God's Reign which is fundamentally people centric, and can be nurtured through them by the ministries of righteousness, and peace under the benediction of the Spirit (Rom 14:17) in the miscellanea of everyday struggles right in the public squares.
33. Above all, the Biblical legacy offers a substantive support to walk on unbeaten paths and entertain new horizons and narratives to sustain our faith tenable, credible and competitive when forces against life get upper hand. It entails that the church in India needs prophetic leadership, guts and imagination to churn new idioms, metaphors and paths to transform crises into opportunities especially in situations like that of Covid pandemic and of the prevailing politics of polarizations, which feeds on communal hatred, riots and mistrust.
34. The Biblical dispensation speaks of the importance of the interior space of one's being to contain and transcend the traumatic situations that the humans have to undergo the Covid distress. The greatest challenge that the Covid has brought into focus is that the Church should conscientize the faithful on the dire need of the means and skills to figure out and live out a life coded and seeded in the Kingdom of God-within in the predicamental situations in one's personal journey. Asian legacies and insights of inward musings would be salutary to explore and experiment the neglected Christian interiority especially in reference to the Reign of God within as recounted in Jesus' discourses and parables.

### **Import of a Competitive and Credible Church**

35. The pandemic has triggered a timely alarm in the Church and to its too often-complacent leadership. The Indian church's approach to the pandemic has, indeed, helped to reimagine its identity and witness in its future journey, though by default. It could turn

out to be an opportunity to reorient itself as people of God walking together on unbeaten path and thereby making path by walking. It points to that the Indian church is to focus more on being and becoming a community of fellowship rooted in Kingdom oriented mission; formation of basic ecclesial communities rooted on the biblical model of discipleship are in the offing among the people and that too at the people's initiative and creative imagination. Such initiatives should be boosted since the future of the Church can largely be conceived and choreographed in these vibrant basic communities as India is being polarized in the name of cultural nationalism and communal majoritarianism as the Israel has exercised in the Exodus and Exilic sojourns.

36. Obviously, the church must be earnest enough to explore newer and innovative ways which foster 'spiritual entrepreneurs' to bring about new narratives and praxes in the land of seekers, sadhus and seers; it seems to be high time to transcend the clutter of cult and ritualism to vibe with the new spiritual movements of social and ecological engagement in the public square and discourses. The public reasoning and seasoning of religious conversations and practices challenge the Church leaders to become shepherds, and servants to build up inclusive communities of compassion and amity rooted in inter-sights and dialogical fellowships. At this juncture a self-critique should be entertained. Somehow, the church's leadership has lost sight of the Gospel priorities and options such as building evangelical fellowships of love, service and sharing; it is obsessed with mammoth institutional structures, that too largely at the service of the rich and the powerful; in this process the Church is estranged from the people on the margins. A radical revisit and course correction with regard to agenda, priorities and policies is imperative to construe a credible and competitive Christian life and witness among the present polarized polity in the name of religion and class; especially the formation of the clergy, the religious and laity, who are to inspire and lead the faithful in the context is to be reconceived and re-constructed with prophetic imagination and courage. No doubt, the Pandemic is a compelling context to resonate with the pertinent call of the Pope Francis that the clergy has to become "shepherds with the smell of the sheep"; it entails a radical critique of the centre by the periphery.
37. In the present assertive as well as competitive multi-religious scenario the witness of Christian life is to be increasingly envisioned and concretised with and among people and through the sundries of daily struggles right in public squares, liminal spaces at the cultural frontiers as well as cyber domains with profound sense of an inclusive and all-embracing vision, way and wisdom of the Reign of God as encrypted in the Gospel narratives. Phrasing more poignantly, our faith and life in the vision of Jesus and his Kingdom ministry should inviolably be lived out in the text and texture of the social, cultural and political democracy so that the Gospel becomes a credible agency to bring about harmony and peace in the present society which is shredded by the politics of hatred and mistrust in a seemingly irretrievable manner. The vulnerable Covid scenario of uncertainty and unpredictability is ridden with immense potential and promise to experiment the Gospel in the Public Square in which common people are helplessly searching for meaning and the worth of life in the threatening void created by the Pandemic to which the present political dispensation looks, by and large, insensitive and callous.
38. Reflecting seriously on its renewal, the church must re-envisage its future through the lens of Pope Francis. He has a new ecclesiological vision for the third millennium, which is the basic thrust of his first encyclical, *Evangelii gaudium*: "The joy of the Gospel fills



the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus ....I wish to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization marked by this joy, while pointing out new paths for the Church's journey in years to come" (EG 1).

39. As figured out in the vision of the Pope Francis, the church must be a bruised one, dirty, an ecclesia on the move, 'field hospital' rather than the one caught up in a web of obsessions and clinging to its own security and comfort zones. It must become a compassionate church showing deep understanding towards the wounded humanity and God's creation. It should move from institutional religiosity of despondency and complacency to becoming a church which is incarnated in the excruciating contingencies daily struggles of children, youth, aged, dalits, women; the Biblical God who is both 'host and hostage' in plight of humanity and embodies the 'groaning of the creation, must be the ultimate referral and prospect while designing the destiny of life on the mother earth.
40. While indulging in a self-critique it should be stated that the highly institutionalized and clericalized Church in India needs a radical transformation in its structures and functioning; it has to become people centric and sensitive and responsive to the 'joys and sorrows' of the people irrespective of religious and political affiliations. Upholding the fundamental human dignity and rights of everyone, particularly, those of the migrated communities, marginalized dalits, and socially and religiously ostracized women should be the vital constituents and coordinates of the new Church; there by the credibility of the Church and its witness is resuscitated from the 'tomb' of the Covid pandemic. Succinctly, the Church should increasingly search the Sacred in the secular as we see in the story of Jesus who has inviolably sought God in 'truth and spirit' among and with the people and in the miscellanea of their daily struggles to procure the 'daily bread' to prolong life in 'love, faith and hope.'
41. The church which is now 'resurrected' from the 'ashes' of the Covid is to become more synodal if it is to be relevant and credible henceforth (*syn hodos*: walking-together). The very nature of the Church is synodal; it means the entire people of God walking together in communion with all and participating in the life and work of the Church in preaching and living the Gospel. A synodal church, church as People of God, where all baptized are equal in dignity and freedom, and share in the priestly, prophetic and royal common priesthood of Christ, would be a challenging orthodoxy and pastoral orthopraxis in the aftermath of Covid. Pope Francis' recently promulgated *Praedicate Evangelium* streamlines the perspectives and agenda for such a competent Church in the present trying times. The Pope has succinctly unveiled his seminal idea of the synodality of the Church, even before the onslaught of the Covid, in his address to the Italian Bishops' Conference in 2017: "To walk together is the constitutive way of the Church; the figure that enables us to interpret reality with the eyes and heart of God; the condition for following the Lord Jesus and being servants of life in this wounded time. The breath and the pace of the Synod show what we are and the dynamism of communion that animates our decisions".
42. One of the key lessons to be drawn from the trauma of the Pandemic is that a radical shift from the prevailing hierarchical ecclesiology to *communio* ecclesiology remarkably happened in *sensus fidei* during the Pandemic times; it implies that sustainability of a vibrant church in precarious times like that of the recent Covid is to be increasingly sought in *Ecclesia discernens* (learning church) though *Ecclesia docens* (teaching) should be given due respect. It entails, synodality has to be the specific *modus vivendi et*

*operandi* of the Church henceforth since ominous pandemic situations would be the order of the day in the future.

### **Re-imagining Theological Referrals and Enhancing Theological Textures and Texts**

43. Covid-19 provides the opportunity to revisit traditional Christian anthropology in which the human being has been considered the crown of creation with the power to subjugate and use it to feed human greed and acquisitiveness. But as a matter of fact, the Anthropocene is but a tiny fraction of the immensely long period of the universe and its evolution. In modern history of disciplines, we often critique how theology focused itself on the human in such a way that theology and anthropology have almost become interchangeable to the extent of indulging a theological caricature that “man has become the measure of everything because God has become man” (Karl Bath)!
44. The experience of Covid-19 has led us to be profoundly aware of human interdependence with nature; how the wellbeing of one depends on the other inextricably; the reality is fundamentally a cosmic web from which the humans are uninfringeable. Hence it is highly important today that theology breathes with both lungs of anthropology and cosmology. This has far-reaching implications the way theology is to be constructed, pursued and the sources and methods it adopts.
45. In particular, the human body which in its materiality has been generally neglected or rather rejected in a theological vision that upholds the divide between the body and soul; such an inordinate stance has advocated to the extent that redemption is liberation from the sinful body. But in the ongoing discourses and conversation especially in the emergent ecological debates, human ‘body’ has become a new site for theological reflections; thereby, human beings are not to be viewed as made up of reason and intelligence alone, but as embodied entities, made up of the *panchabuta* and of feelings and emotions. Body has also epistemological significance because our perceptions and knowledge of the world is mediated through our five senses and triggered by our pathos. Our body is not an inert matter but it is the immense reservoir of cosmic memory, which is encrypted in the DNA; human body belongs to the whole creation (*Prapancha*: the five elements); *ratio* is only one of the components of human ontology; it cannot exist without body, and it is through the body with its senses and memories that one can become ‘Cogito’! Mind is *manomayakosa* which implies, the ‘mind’ is encrypted in the memories stacked in every 30 trillion cells from time immemorial (healthline<https://www.healthline.com › number-of-cells-in-body>).
46. A retelling of theological presumptions and horizons is to be earnestly engaged in the purview of the human body whose vulnerability and frailty we experienced through Covid-19 is in fact the hinge of salvation – *caro cardo salutis*. For, the Word took on this form of human frailty and became flesh (Jn 1:14), and gave his body and blood as nourishment for all the humans and the entire creation, like a loving mother caring for all her children and telling them to eat and drink (Fr. Beschi in *Thembavani*, Vol.3, *Prohidappadalam*, Nos. 42-46).
47. The pioneering reflections on the body as a veritable theological coordinate and constituent should be ‘re-cognized’ and should be brought into mainstream theological process; the Catholic theology has to enhance and broaden its ecosystem in which the ‘body’ with its innate connect with the whole of creation could be a challenging narrative in the theological conversations and debates henceforth.

48. It entails a radical shift in the theological process from Anthropology to Cosmology, or rather Ecology. In the immensity of the multiverse of millions of stars and numerous galaxies in a borderless expansive and diffusive space the earth is only a microscopic spec. In this vast ecological spatial to hold the view that ‘man as the measure’ is nothing but the naive human hubris and acquisitiveness. The Covid has strikingly driven home the idea that human being is not mere “*Cogito ergo sum*” but equally a ‘bodied-being’ deeply interwoven and embedded in the cosmos, and unequivocally belongs to this earth; thereby, human identity has indisputably to be figured out within the text and texture of cosmic intelligence and energy; human being has no ‘existence’ beyond or outside the cosmos; it is irretrievably encrypted and bonded to the cosmic body and its vitality; its witness is possible indispensably by being a constituent of the cosmos which is verily very *manifesto* and epiphany of the God of the living.
49. The Covid has brought about the stark reality that human being through its bodied existence is fundamentally of this vast creation; thereby the identity of humans cannot but be conceived and construed and celebrated in friendship with the whole creation; humans should vibrate with the cosmic *logos (dharma)*: its inherent ‘implicate order’ of knowledge and energy as the Quantum Physics advocates. To phrase more incisively, humans are primarily ‘ecological’ rather than ‘rational’ (*Cogito*); ecological reasoning and seasoning could be a new theological exercise in the scenario of Covid in which the very ‘life’ is threatened in a disastrous way owing to the disrespect and estrangement from the ecological claims and balance by *homo sapiens*.
50. Moreover, in the churn of Covid related events, the import of ‘Life’ *de facto* and *per se* has become an unqualified referential independent of all religious moorings and debates. A new religious consciousness deeply seeded in the very phenomenon of life, and its myriad forms and dimensions is on rise especially among the New-Gen. A life centric religiousness cannot but be cosmological and ecological; it is happening in the conversations on secular domains and in the sundries of everyday life, especially in the common-sense theology of the common people (*aam admi*); the immense multiverse has silently and spontaneously become an inclusive narrative and platform without historical baggage for an inter-faith/multi-faith fellowship and partnership in the present Covid ridden context. To phrase differently, phenomenon of ‘life’ with its myriad manifestations, layers and domains has become an inclusive referral, a common text and an all-embracing texture for the theological conversation henceforth; such as life-centric and life-bound theological debates and discourses have immense potential and scope especially in the present multicultural and multi-religious ethos.
51. As the idea of salvation unveiled in the Gospel of Jesus is ‘life-centric’, a paradigmatic theological shift that could be mused about in the scenario of an ‘ecological turn’ in the secular and religious conversations, could verily be from an ‘economy of salvation’ to an ‘ecology of salvation’ in which the configuring referral could verily be Jesus, the Risen Christ, the source and summit of ‘fulness of life’: the First Fruit of Resurrection” (Gal 2:22).
52. Evidently, the life of Jesus who is the “firstborn of all creation” (Col 1:15) as well as “the firstborn from the dead” (Col 1:18) is the provocative narrative and the empowering referral when we are forced to live out in a compelling Covid scenario in which we have to live interacting with the ominous horizon and context of death in every fraction of a

second. He is the “Author of life” (Acts 3:15) as St. Peter rightly recommends Jesus in his third sermon so much so that Jesus’ story is an evoking as well as reassuring parable as the threat of Covid has seemingly become an inevitable haunting module of the unfolding of life in the years to come.

53. In this crisis ridden situation, often the humans complain and rebel against God in their common conversations and in soliloquies of silent moments; or rather they oft disregard God or hold a cynical attitude towards the talk of God as we see in the case of Israelites especially during the Exodus and Exile sojourns when calamities hunt them. Unfortunately, the humans are unaware that they rebel against a God whom they have created in the ambit of their fear and greed rather than the God who has created them. What is operative in this blunt revolt against God is human hubris and cynicism, which are contradictory to the fundamental religious attitudes of unconditional surrender and receptivity as we find in the narrative of Jesus and Mary.
54. As the Danish philosopher and theologian, Soren Kierkegaard rightly says we live forward but understand backward (“hermeneutics of retrieval”: appropriating the present crisis through the core charism). Episodes like Covid can become auspicious ‘*Kairos*’ if we live and witness these moments of abatement and ‘dark-nights of the soul’ (St. John of the Cross) and appropriate the anguish with the wisdom of God revealed in the salvation history in a perspective. Such a faith exercise would transform such traumatic events to ‘re-member’ ourselves with a God who has always been truthful to his promises and would fulfil them in the fulness of time, of which the history is the indisputable witness and proof (Ez. 12:28; Gal 6:9).
55. Evidently, these moments become promising if approximated in our faith consciousness cultured in a God who is the covenantal partner in our journey; thereby we discern the inscrutable ways of the Spirit through the ‘cloud of unknowing’ of human constructs; these crisis ridden events would evolve into propitious *Kairos* when ‘unlearning’ becomes ‘real-learning’; thereby the mysteries of life would spontaneously unravel in the vision and wisdom of God. The narrative of Jesus, who is raised by the Spirit, is to be the consistent referral and ideal when we are entangled in the crisis like Covid pandemic distress which continuously unsettles the rhyme and rhythm of our life in an unpredicted manner and shatters all our so-called theological certainties and absolutes. It is indeed incredible how Jesus has transformed the cross of agony into a ‘plus’ of ecstasy by resonating and seasoning with the will of the Father; what we discern is that the ‘tomb’ of disease, desolation and death becoming the ‘womb’ of new life, enlightenment, and joy in the story of Jesus.
56. Jesus’ story poignantly reveals how to take on the crisis that Covid like distress brings about: hopelessness, meaninglessness, abandonment, wretchedness, and even an ethical and a moral vacuum in the struggle of survival; such menacing emotions spin out to a kind of mindset in which theological debates and spiritual discourses become irrelevant and cynical by default. These are the moments when one should indulge in the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ towards settled patterns while engaging in a “Hermeneutics of Resourcement’ of root-paradigms of faith; our faith is to be revisited and re-moored in the Christological foundations. Indeed, the life of Jesus has not been without such devastating episodes; his life was ridden with excruciating mental as well as physical agony to the extent of sweating blood, and he finds himself in a profound sense of being abandoned by his Father for whom he has expended his life without any reserve through

and through. He relied on the ‘known-God’ and ‘unknown-God’, whom he has visualized and constructed as ‘Abba’, who is prodigious in compassion; he has invariably sought solace by fulfilling the ‘will of the Father’. But in the garden Gethsemane such anthropocentric constructs of God have been vain and futile. To an extent he has rebelled against the Father; he has complained or even interrogated the Father while saying: “Why have you forsaken me?” The Covid situation has skidded us as well to such theological dilemmas and spiritual void especially when God is understood as Emmanuel, the God with us!

57. Eventually Jesus has won over the trial; he has triumphed over this existential ‘anguish’ by engaging in a total ‘surrender’ to a God who is utterly ‘unknowable’ analogies and human constructs *per se* and *de facto*; Jesus’ words “not my will but thine be done” (Lk 22:42) has been a surrender prompted by his gut intelligence, which is beyond all human rationale. It has been a defining auspicious moment in which the human hubris is utterly conquered and annihilated; it is not an argumentative moment but a ‘knowing’ through unknowing’ – ‘a pathless path, an ‘active passivity’ from the Buddhist point of view; it has been a pure act of renunciation, or rather a ‘renunciation of renunciation’ in which there is only ‘surrender’, an absolute and unqualified surrender devoid of ‘subject’ or ‘object’. It is a pure ‘act’ *sui generis* (*nishkama-karma*) in which ‘sat’ (being) and ‘act’ (karma) coincide and penetrate mutually without a mediation; it is a moment of ‘truth’, a processual truth (*emet*) which is justified in virtue of itself; it is an immersive musing in the eternal flow of Existence, which has neither beginning nor end.
58. It is like a mutual movement happening in ‘face-face’ encounter in which one enters infinitude. If to take a leaf from the Hindu mystical tradition, it is a mutual flow happening as a drop of water merges with the ocean; as the drop of water ‘surrenders’ into the ‘Ocean’, the ‘Ocean’ simultaneously and instantly inflows into the drop of the water; it would be an ecstasy in which the ‘break-through’ spins out in the agony of ‘break-down’ of surrender. It is like a Kairos in which finitude and infinitude co-exist and entertain an interplay, and the meaning of life explodes in the spontaneity and exuberance of “Sacrament of Now”: “the Eternal Now”.
59. What would be appropriate and discrete at this Covid precarity is a conscious and a passionate ‘re-treat’ into the Christological foundations of our faith rather than naively disassociating ourselves with foundations of our faith; thereby we will be able to make the theological credentials and presuppositions interplay with the concerns and anguish that the Covid pandemic has unleashed. It necessitates an honest and impassionate exercise of ‘re-visiting’ Jesus’ narrative, which will only help to search for new theological coordinates, metaphors and horizons to deepen and broaden our comprehension and experience of the mystery of Jesus and his mission. Thereby theological exercise helps the event of Incarnation to prolong its logic and advocacy; by default, the transient, ever passing life procures a referral which instills in humans an ineffable hope cultured in faith in life in the mystery of love.
60. As we look deep into narrative of Jesus as unveiled in the Gospel stories, we would not miss the focal and crucial mindfulness of Jesus through which he had been knitting and choreographing his story of life by boldly welcoming ‘Calvary’ as the zenith of his journey; a conscious awareness of the death on the cross had been the very grammar as well as telos of Jesus’ life; the constant awareness that his life was fundamentally a journey to Jerusalem has not made him estrange from life and its commitments.

Paradoxically, as the Gospel stories reveal, he has been passionate towards life; he has celebrated his life to “fulness of life” under the shadow of death and eventually has conquered death by instilling in it a new meaning in the mystery of vicarious love; his life has been an engaging story through and through the reality of life with its ‘sorrows and joys’; he traversed all the towns and villages doing good (Mt 10: 35) so much so that his ‘passing-by’ became a ‘pass-over’ in the mystery of his redemptive love and service. He has become the Son of God not by fleeing from the ‘world of sin and death’ but through an engaging journey through the ‘joys and sorrows’ of life right in the occurrences of the world.

61. He triumphed over the ‘Covid-crises of death, anguish, meaninglessness, precarity, uncertainty etc., by being a ‘wounded-healer’ through a profound sense of ‘surrender’ to the ‘unknowable God’ at the domain of his consciousness and staunch solidarity with the sufferings of people. Jesus’ journey has not been a lone and private journey of the so-called ‘personal salvation’ as construed in the Eastern religions but profoundly cultured and configured in the text and texture of the whole life with its fragilities and frailties as well as joys and blisses. Covid has taught the humanity that the whole existence is an inextricable communion of beings, and the truth is revealed in an ontology of simultaneity of existence on the spectrum of creative correlations, and synergic mutations; Jesus’ narrative unambiguously teaches us that the existence is an interdependent and inclusive fellowship of beings rooted in love, sharing and service, in which personal journeys are to be integrated and appropriated and redeemed. Salvation is not individualistic but communitarian; everybody needs everybody; or rather ‘my salvation’ is inevitably embedded and embodied in the salvation of whole humanity as well as the multiverse. In this eternal journey, Pandemic contexts are to be interpreted as only opportunities and potentials to delve deep into the mystery of life and its unfolding in its wholeness of which disease and death are inviolable and inevitable components to be accepted and appropriated in the epiphany of existence.
62. It could verily be advocated that the core of the Gospel of Jesus is the wisdom churned and coded in the stark vulnerability and precarity of the life process of birth and death through a hermeneutics of incarnational engagement with the groaning of the whole creation for liberation inclusive of the pursuit of humans (Rom 8:22). The predicament of a pandemic is an ever recurring dilemma in the past and so will it be in the future as well. Disease and death are the precarious constituents of our passing life, which is dense with suffering and anguish. The humanity had already had numerous catastrophic episodes like world wars, Spanish flu pandemic which decimated millions of human lives. The ongoing Russian territorial aggression on Ukraine is ominous, and has frustrated irretrievably the peace and harmony of the whole world, and might lead to a World War III even. This ‘woundedness’ is precarious facticity of this manifested world, in and through which the meaning of life is to be constructed being within the process; this is the adventure of life.
63. Saying so means no way to trivialize the menacing impact of the ongoing onslaught of the Covid and other devastating episodes like earthquakes, wars, disease and violence. What’s crucial is to take account of such tragic events of mammoth proportion in a meaningful perspective so that the reality of life in all its distress, agonies, fears and joys are integrated in a meaningful way, for which our faith in the Gospel offers us a path and perspective. The life in this beautiful planet will ever unfold exuberantly because, as our faith prompts and convinces us that the very grammar of life is verily encrypted in the

vicarious love of Jesus, through which he conquered 'death' and its myriad manifestations, which might be pandemics, or wars, or natural catastrophes like tsunami or earthquakes, in the mystery of redemptive love. This vicarious salvific love that reconciles and restores the paradoxes of life and death, successes and failures, diseases and remedies is the core and code of whole existence and its exuberant epiphany *ab initio* and it is undoubtedly going to be an ever happening event *ad infinitum*; instead of being stuck and lost in the transient scenarios like Covid the distress that such episodes brings about, should be converted into a creative potential to resonate with the embedded vicarious love which is the very grammar (dharma) of the redemption of the whole existence. In this stream of 'faith-seeking-understanding', one discerns that the inherent fabric of whole existence is verily Christological to the core and content in the final interpretation of reality; the advocacy of Paul that all things both in heaven and earth, visible and invisible are churned and spined out in the redemptive love of Jesus, brings about conviction and credibility so that the life in its myriad depths, breadth and heights will continue to unfold ever and always, notwithstanding the episodes like Covid and the sequent distresses.

### **Competitive Faith Perspectives and Praxes for an Adult Church**

64. Agencies and Departments of the CBCI, CRI, like CHAI, Caritas, India should be recast so that they become more people centric, for which they should be empowered to take on frontier ministries; thereby they become skilled and are equipped to get involved creatively in situations like that of Pandemic.
65. A centralised Special Desk or FORUM to disseminate correct information, data and statistics could be a new initiative so that accurate information can be given to the public; thereby such desks can contribute medical literacy among the common people; it would be a great service to empower the people to take on such issues by themselves based on hard objective data rather than spurious information or tell-tale rumours.
66. Church agencies should increasingly be expertized in the use of modern social Medias so that people become informative and knowledgeable; thereby, they are not misguided by the fake and fraud news. Dissemination of objective and expert knowledge is itself an evangelizing mission in the present era of media. This is how, perhaps, the Pope's call to transform the Church as "Field-Hospital".
67. The 'domestic churches' should be nurtured and fostered through debates, discourses, and *satsang* so that people are empowered to brace up the distress situation like that of Pandemic. The Covid has brought to the limelight the critical importance and role of the basic Christian communities in sustaining our faith and its credentials so that the unexpected calamities like Pandemic, communal riots, natural catastrophes like earthquakes, tsunami, flood etc. are rightly interpreted and integrated in our faith praxis and perspective.
68. If we resonate with Indian/Asian religious traditions our faith and its praxis should be nurtured in healthy debates and deliberations rather than restricting the laity invariably at the receiving end and treating them as blind obedient servants to the instructions and teachings of the clerics. They should be trained to live out their faith critically and should be trained to interpret their faith presuppositions in unpredicted and unmeditated scenarios of Pandemic. Indian religious pursuit is 'argumentative' (Amartya Sen), and

unfolded in dialogues, discussion, *satsang*, debates and tolerance in multi-cultural and inclusive socio-cultural ethos.

69. The best thing that the Pandemic has brought out is that it generated a domestic church in which the faithful have been compelled to look at the faith credentials in a critical and interpretative way on their personal and familial domains. They began to interrogate faith categories critically but without being alienated from the Gospel; thereby their faith has become very autobiographical and experiential; they became more engaged in their faith and turned out to be responsible to their faith credentials by internalizing Jesus' teachings. People have begun to 'theologize' their faith in crisis situations so much so that they have grown adults in their faith and witness. It is definitely a very promising development if we look at the Pandemic and people's response to it in a perspective. Such debates and deliberations are to be furthered and encouraged for a vibrant faith community and thus let the faith of the laity become responsible, engaging, credible and competitive in their Christian life; it is indeed a liberative exercise that they are no more over dependent of clergy and ecclesial authorities; the future of the Church abides in an empowered laity; after all Jesus is a layman and his movement has been an *andholan*, initiated and steered by the laity.
70. To phrase differently, the laity should become adults and self-reliant in their faith so much so that they become capable to interpret the disasters like Pandemic in the texture of faith right in the whirlpool of such challenging contingencies; thereby they become imaginative and even prophetic to transform the misfortunes as potentials and resources to enter deep into the faith consciousness. It will help the People of God independent, responsible and mature and, thereby, less dependent on the clerics. The future of the Church is to be increasingly envisioned in the formation of a mature, adult and self-reliant laity and its leadership; especially through their evangelical witness through their service, availability and Gospel values right in the public spaces make the Gospel competitive, credible and acceptable especially in the present milieu of assertive religious pluralism. Jesus' Gospel becomes constructive and credible in the present competitive religiosity only when it is articulated and lived out in the public reasoning, of which the laity the most appropriate agency.

### **Conclusion**

History is a veritable witness that the humanity has overcome mammoth catastrophes like epidemic, war, earthquakes etc., with an optimistic vision and proactive engagement with such distressful episodes. The Covid crisis is to be triumphed over by collective resolve through creative imagination and innovative ways. Our faith in Christ and his Gospel embodies immense potential, prophetic imagination and praxes to tread on unbeaten paths leaving behind the settled and set patterns, calling for greater trust in the wisdom of the Lord of Life as and when disasters like Pandemic happen. What's imperative is to embrace a creative mindfulness, or rather heartfulness, and to indulge in innovative ways; this entails to culture a radical surrendering faith in a "Lord who comes" (*Maranatha*) ever, "every moment and every age, every day and every night in the seasons and out of seasons (Tagore, *Gitanjali*, no. 45). As our faith assures us that the future space is not hollow or empty but ridden with God's promises and benediction. The world is not without God, and God cannot be without world for the whole creation along with humanity is the spectrum on which God lives out and becomes exuberant and become a God of the living. The ITA deliberations as a whole are streamlined in a proactive vision and praxis along with a God who is Immanuel, who has been both a 'host' and 'hostage' in the journey of humanity and the whole creation



from the beginning and to the Eschaton; the whole existence is an ever-unfolding spectacle of God's benevolence and will ever be under the spell of God's benediction *ad infinitum* because our God is the "Author of Life" always and ever. The Pandemic and the collective response to this catastrophe in a synergic compassion, love, service and sharing by the world-community displays the immense potentials of goodness latent in the collective will, wisdom, vision of humanity. Moreover, the spontaneous and earnest response to this disaster and to the sequent distress of enormous proportion in a creative mindset and proactive praxis have been possible owing to the ardent trust in the Author of Life. In sum, the Pandemic has irrevocably and inviolably seeded our collective trust in the inexhaustible munificence and blessing of a "God who is of the living", now and forever.

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