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Preface

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has affected people's lives in radical ways. The high degree of infection necessitated the practice of physical distancing, quarantine, or even city lockdown. This has impacted greatly on people's social interactions at home, in the neighbourhood, at school, at work, and in church life. It has exacerbated the already existing inequalities in society, as businesses closed and people lost their jobs. Access to the vaccine was skewed by the North/South economic divide.

Intersecting the pandemic issues are other contemporary challenges such as environmental problems/climate crisis, the rise of populism and disinformation campaigns, and the curtailment of freedom of speech and expression. Despite the latter and the risks of COVID-19 infection, people in various places gathered to protest against the government's mishandling of the pandemic, increased repression, politicising the vaccine, and so on.

The pandemic further magnified the importance of the work of women at home and on the front lines, while simultaneously revealing structural inequalities at all levels. In an interview on key themes of life during the pandemic (*Vatican News*), Pope Francis underlined that

it is impossible to emerge from a crisis the same as before. Either we come out better or we come out worse. And how we emerge depends on the decisions we make during the crisis.¹

1 Manuel Cubias, "Pope Addresses Key Themes of Life During Pandemic in Interview", *Vatican News*, 7 October 2020, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-10/pope-francis-interview-il-mio-papa-coronavirus-life.html>, accessed March 2021.

Within this context and with the above challenges, the 10th Biennial Conference of the Ecclesia of Women in Asia,² 22-26 February 2022, focused on the theme: Toward life-giving communities in a post-pandemic world: Asian feminist theological perspectives. “Life-giving community” is one that is inclusive, communitarian, egalitarian, empowering, and respectful of differences. It is a community that goes beyond the boundaries of gender, class, or race/ethnicity, fostering the right relations with God, other peoples, and creation. This Special Issue is a collection of selected articles from that Conference.

The first two articles focus on how the COVID-19 pandemic called for a critical introspection into our way of being human. Kochurani Abraham underlines our interdependence foregrounded by the pandemic experience and proposes the mystical notion “*We Inter-are*” by the visionary Buddhist sage Thich Nhat Hanh as a key for growing into a consciousness of inter-relatedness with other beings on this planet. Through the lens of Martha Nussbaum’s capabilities approach, Mary Mee-Yin Yuen writes on *Caring for women on the frontlines* such as cleaning workers and domestic helpers. She emphasises the importance of women’s moral agency, that is, giving a voice to women themselves, to enable them to form life-giving communities.

The next two articles highlight the vulnerability of women to the economic volatility brought about by the pandemic. Building on Joan Tronto’s ethics of care and Pope Francis’ *Fratelli Tutti*, Stephanie Ann Puen and Rachel Joyce Marie Sanchez argue for a caring justice framework to navigate *Women’s needs vs. economic survival* in the Philippines during and after the pandemic. In *Japanese women’s activism sustains a life-giving community in the pandemic*, Jeane Peracullo elaborates on the ecological ethics of solidarity as practised by AWEPP (Asian Women Empowerment Project) in modifying their traditional forms of assistance to the needs of poor women in Asian countries, in order to address specifically the effects of the pandemic.

During the pandemic, authoritarian regimes adopted a military approach to the pandemic and exploited it to strengthen military control. Kristine Meneses, following Michel Foucault, traces the contours of a theology of transgression in *Militarism and fear in a time of pandemic in the Philippines*. Diane Therese Veloso, on the other hand, examines *The experiences of currently and formerly incarcerated women in a time of pandemic* and its challenges for building life-giving communities.

2 The Ecclesia of Women in Asia (EWA) is an academic forum of Catholic women theologians in Asia. See <https://ecclesiaofwomenblog.wordpress.com/>.

The next section centres on the pandemic as it foregrounds sexuality issues. The increase in the cyber mode of communication during the pandemic ignited postings of protests and discontent about Catholic schools' handling of cases of abuse. In *Becoming whole again*, Jacklyn Cleofas proposes the relational safety model by Ma. Carmen La Viña and the holistic pastoral approach of Leonila Bermisa for a more adequate response to the issue. In *Comfort women surviving pandemics*, Sharon Bong explores a feminist postcolonial theology of radical hospitality. Dialoguing their experience with biblical texts, she critiques the hospitality conferred on men by men in Genesis 19 and Judges 19 that renders women's bodies violable and argues for the need to go beyond the "law of ekstasis", as propounded in *Fratelli Tutti*, when rendering "hospitality" to comfort women. In *Sexy chinkies in Indian cities*, Inatoli Phughoto Aye highlights the escalation of racism against indigenous North-eastern women in Indian cities during the COVID-19 pandemic. She compares their experience of discrimination based on race and gender with how Mary Magdalene was perceived in Christian history. She explores how Mary can be a symbol of resistance for the mostly Christian north-eastern women.

The last section deals directly with Christian communities and the challenges and possibilities toward transformation that have emerged during the pandemic. In *#ChoosetoChallenge*, Ma. Marilou Ibita and Ma. Maricel Ibita expound on how the See-Judge-Act-Evaluate-Celebrate/Ritualise process, employing feminist biblical characterisation to interpret Matthew 15:21-28, can function as a spiritual resource for Christians working with the urban poor toward the realisation of the UNSDGs during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. In *Pandemic oasis*, Marinda Keng-Fan Chan explores how popular religiosities that have morphed online during the COVID-19 outbreak can foster *communitas* that is inclusive, nurturing, and empowering for women in Macao, China. Lastly, Agnes Brazal and Teresa Camarines examine *Women's reception of cyber churches during the pandemic and indications for the future*. The study shows no significant difference in the level of engagement in religious activities before and during the pandemic among women respondents in the NCR, Philippines. Women have played crucial roles in maintaining the religious well-being of their households, suggesting their exercise of agency and leadership. A correlation/regression analysis of the data also projects a significant increase in the level of engagement in 10 online religious activities post-pandemic, implying the need for the church to continue its online engagement in these activities even after the pandemic.

The 10th Biennial Conference of EWA, from which the above articles were culled, was also a celebration of the 20th anniversary of EWA since its founding in 2002. We dedicate this issue to all those who have given their time, effort, and financial assistance over the past twenty years toward nurturing EWA as a source of support and community for theologians in Asia!