

Life in a Pandemic: Some Reflections from *The Plague* (1947) and the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: Human existence is a continual struggle against various kinds of calamities including infectious diseases like the COVID-19 virus that threatens the vulnerability of human life. It has affected humanity throughout the globe who are either hungry due to financial crisis or hospitalized or even killed because of the virus infections. This enduring threat continues to persist as long as the holding sway of the coronavirus remains unresolved. It is no accident that the pandemic of the century mirrors *The Plague* (1947) of Albert Camus in which both catastrophic events challenged the social order and the vulnerability of human life. Although the health crisis exists in a different period in the history of mankind, nevertheless, the existential crisis it has created has no different. This paper aims to (1) highlight some of the similar events in both pandemics and (2) argue that the pandemic can be an avenue for religious introspection.

Keywords: COVID-19, *The Plague*, philosophy, Albert Camus, pandemic, faith

I. INTRODUCTION

Human existence is a continual struggle against various kinds of calamities including infectious diseases like the COVID-19 virus that threatens the vulnerability of human life. The uncertainty of one's life in the face of a pandemic causes so much anxiety and continual fear as Heidegger (1977) says of "pursuing and pushing nothing other than the brink and the danger of the possibility of destining". Coronavirus infections are very much alarming hence, it continues to be deadly despite the many protocols and preventive measures imposed by authorities to contain the spread of the virus. As argued by Haleem et al., (2020), it has affected humanity who are either hungry because of financial crisis or hospitalized or even killed because of the virus infections. Cummins (2021), commented that the pandemic of the century has dragged humanity into the most serious global health crisis since World War II. Schwab and Malleret (2020) on the other hand, describe it as the greatest fallout which radically transforms every aspect of human life. In the words of Belghazi et al., (2020), who quoted Agamben (2020), these abrupt changes of life become a state of normal condition from which humans become accustomed to living in a state of permanent crisis not realizing that life has been reduced to a purely biological condition and has lost not only its political dimension but also any human dimension.

This current pandemic can be mirrored in *The Plague* (1947) of Albert Camus from which some events of the novel are very much akin to the recent health crisis across the globe.

For instance, in *The Plague*, the hesitations and doubts of people in Oran who first witnessed the signs and symptoms of an emerging epidemic depict the same disposition shown by the Wuhan authorities when the COVID-19 started to flare – up. The rumors about the virus spread across the globe and created so much fear and anxiety in the public. In response, health protocols were implemented to control and regulate a much more devastating human-to-human transmission of the virus.

In both cases, humanity was not only affected by either coronavirus or the plague but creates a pessimistic disposition of hatred, anxiety, and the fear of impending death (Muthulekshmi and Indu, 2020). Although the COVID-19 and the Plague exist in different periods it can be posited that the effects of both health crises on humans are no different, for they both experienced the same economic and social disruption and health protocols (Heynders, 2021). Muthulekshmi et al., (2020), added that both events draw humanity into an existential crisis which may lead to either a state of absurdity or an avenue to strengthen one's faith in God. This paper aims to (1) highlight some of the similar events in both pandemics and (2) argue that the pandemic can be an avenue for religious introspection.

An Emerging Pandemic

The event begins at the town of Oran on the Algerian coastline. The town gained its popularity as headquarters of the prefect of the French division and being the center of the seafood industry of the country. Much of the people of Oran are business-oriented and devoted most of their time and habit to making money. The citizens were merely fascinated with business, thus, giving little time to personal interactions and commitments to which according to Camus depicts a "completely modern" city (Camus, 1947), a foreshadowing of a dehumanized society from which the people including the authorities are indifferent to any altruistic care (Bonk, 2014).

This active materialistic life in the city of Oran was soon disrupted by dying humanity caused by an emerging pandemic. Camus foretold this in a statement: "Think what it must be for a dying man, trapped behind hundreds of walls, all sizzling with heat" (p.9)! The non - containment of the deadly virus brought about by the deadly plague put the people of Oran "behind closed shutters" (p.7), in contrast to the COVID-19 pandemic that shattered the favorable condition of

humanity into a condition of continual fear and struggles for survival.

The unusual incidents of dead rats scattered all over the town of Oran, according to Dr. Bernard Rieux, a resident doctor at the moment suspected that the event might cause a much worrying situation of virus infections and contaminations to the public. This confirms the death of Michel and some others in the town and numerous numbers of infected patients both show symptoms of unexplained illness that started the plague. The doctors who are monitoring the health issue unanimously agreed to the possible epidemic outbreak. Unfortunately, the doctor's diagnosis was not supported by the government instead they were accused of initiating and creating alarming public chaos. Camus describes this hesitation shown by the authorities in a statement, "that just now it's you who's troubling the peace of others" (p.34).

The same is true of how the Chinese authority handles the issue of COVID-19 in Wuhan. Dr. Li Wenliang who stands as Dr. Bernard Rieux in the novel shares a common sentiment. They were both reprimanded by the authorities for making a false remark of an unfounded disease thus, creating chaos and public disturbance. This indifference and complacent disposition of the Chinese authorities at the start of the COVID-19 flare-ups earned so much criticism throughout the world (Muthulekshmi and Indu, 2020). According to Hongkong journalist Verna Yu, as cited by Zizek (2020), the coronavirus transmission could have been prevented if and only if the Chinese government valued the citizen's freedom of speech.

The City of Oran somehow prefigures Wuhan, the capital of Hubei Province in central China where the outbreak of the coronavirus was first detected through virus transmission caused by the improper health sanitation of the wet market. According to reports, the virus transmission started to transpire in December of 2019 in the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan, a city with 11 million inhabitants (Honigsbaum, 2019).

The Plague (1947) and COVID-19 Pandemic

The "wait and see" policy of Oran and Wuhan endangers the public and subjects the whole world to lockdown and quarantine. In the Philippines for instance, the quarantine guidelines crafted by the Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) against infectious disease aim to break the chain of virus infections. Just this year 2021 when the Delta variant of COVID-19 started to plague India and some of the neighboring countries of the Philippines causing the curve of infections to rise, the country once again implemented the lockdown on the major cities. The heightened restrictions were implemented to stop and contain the spread of the delta variant around the country while the government continues to find ways of having the people vaccinated.

The health restriction policy according to Zizek (2020) created an "immense amount of suffering" which eventually resulted in a "state of utter despair and frustration" (Muthulekshmi & Indu, 2020). People working in public as essential workers were mostly affected especially those who were trapped in the cities due to the closing of the borders. The uneasiness of the situation was more aggravated by unfounded rumors or fake news emerging from different social media platforms fueled the existing fear and anxiety (Estadilla, 2020).

Thus, in both settings, the negative effects of lockdown are not only physical but also psychological. The findings of Aruta (2020) and Buenaventura et al., (2020) both confirmed the psychological effects of lockdown on the Filipino people, especially the older ones. Accordingly, while the imposition of lockdown in the country is intended to keep the individuals safe from the deadly infections, nevertheless, the prohibitions and restrictions to social mobility bring about unintended outcomes of mental health disorders such as depressions, anxiety, and the decline of well-being, especially among older Filipinos. Puyat et al (2020) enumerated these depressive symptoms experienced by the general public during pandemics like "not enjoying life", "sleep was restless", "feeling lonely", "depressed" and "people were unfriendly". Thus, the implementation of restricted mobility most likely reduces the person's feeling of happiness (Szoltysek, 2020 & Bernstein, 2020).

The same desperations felt by the people of Oran when the restricted mobility was imposed by the government. The people felt like prisoners detached from the comfort of life and the company of others. The residents both shared a common sentiment of exile being abruptly cut from their social engagement with others. This sentiment of the people is driven by the fact that they were detained and locked in the town caused them so much affliction and disappointment. This feeling is emphatically described by Camus as a "human condition" of absurdity caused by the unintended separation from friends and loved ones. (Judt, 2001).

The defining character of both pandemics drastically transforms humanity from the life of proximity to restrictions and isolation, from sociality and community to physical distancing. The catastrophic effects of the pandemics are distinctly noticeable in all aspects of life which results in a great reversal of life from "normal" to the "new normal". This reversal of life is quite discernable in this time of pandemic in which civility might be replaced by barbarism due to anxiety, financial crisis, and uncertainties which eventually destroy the very foundations of humanity (Zizek, 2020). In addition, both pandemics forces authorities to enforce restrictions and confinement which results in mass hysteria. (Schwab and Malleret, 2020). In the words of Mathew Gumpert as cited by Maarouf et al (2020) the pandemic of the century is shattering, leading to a kind of estrangement of the old life and suspension of temporality as a reflection of a profound reality.

Worldwide transportations are no longer a convenience to mobility rather a threat to the increasing numbers of infections and contaminations. The threat brought about by the pandemic becomes a nightmare beyond everyone's imagination.

The unimaginable and catastrophic effects of the pandemic can be gauged on the number of cases and death toll. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) from January 03, 2020, to August 20, 2021, the Philippines has 1,791,003 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 30,881 deaths. Globally as of August 20, 2021, the confirmed cases spike to 209,876,613 including 4,400,284 deaths (WHO, 2021). More than the number of confirmed cases and death toll, the effectiveness of medicine and vaccine created by pharmaceutical companies for treating the virus and its mutation is in question. Extreme fear and anxiety have become the common symptoms of humanity hence, the future is concealed by the devastating effects of the pandemic. Social life is disrupted and the continued slowing down of the economy worldwide resulted in the widespread of jobless individuals put the human condition doomed.

Thus, in both pandemics' humanity was driven into a divisive and traumatizing experience. The death of an innocent child in the novel as described by Camus as "the angry death – cry that has sounded through the ages of mankind" (p. 216) somehow mirrors the millions of deaths caused by the COVID-19 around the globe. The uncertainty of life and the anxiety of dying in a pandemic situation can be an avenue for religious conviction and renewal by seeing the crisis in the eyes of faith as what Fr. Paneloux feels in the novel. The experiences of Fr. Paneloux of a dying child provided him a clear moral ground to stay and fight the plague (Wagner, 2020). Fr. Paneloux was illuminated by the event and made use of it as a great opportunity of exercising faith in God who is the rock and the source of hope (Hart & Koenig, 2020).

This religious introspection is exemplified by Christians in Wuhan headed by minister Luo and Pastor Huang Lee who courageously expressed their faith in God in evangelizing the people amid the risk and increasing rate of the COVID-19 infection. Similarly, Fr. Paneloux did the same in the novel inviting Christians to adhere to God in this time of great crisis (Muthulekshmi & Indu, 2020; p.7).

The study of Del Castillo et al., (2021) to selected Filipino Catholics during the COVID-19 pandemic showed the same resiliency and optimism. Despite the fear, anxiety, and distress brought about by the pandemic, the Filipinos were driven into a much more intimate love and affection with loved ones. Instead of isolating oneself at home because of the fear of infections, the Filipino's rootedness in God moves them even to a heroic and supererogatory action as front liners and essential workers during the pandemic. This confirms Baker et al., (2020) reflection that the shattering and torturing experiences of the pandemic can be meaningful experiences

of faith in God and opportunity of seeing the best of humanity and of strengthening one's endurance for a possible tragedy like the COVID-19 which befall humanity in the future (Baker et al., 2020).

Pope Francis in his *Urbi et orbi* (The city of Rome and the entire World) the papal address to the universal church reminded the defining moments of humanity amid the health crisis. The Pope reiterated the importance of religious introspection as an avenue of conversion against selfishness and indifference as a consequence of the pandemic. This internal disposition to prayer enables a person to transform selfishness into permanent traits of solidarity towards integral human development and the fullness of life (Pope Francis, 2020; 16) in rebuilding a better world. In an inspiring reflection on prayer, Cardinal Blasé Cupich on May 29, 2020, has this to say, prayer does not only reveal who we are but move us to see and attend to the needs of others. He added that this way of understanding prayer depicts that of Mother Teresa who said: "Prayer in action is love and love in action is service." This anticipates Albert Camus essentialism. According to him:

... a loveless world is a dead world, and always there comes an hour when one is weary of prisons, of one's work, and devotion to duty, and all one craves for is a loved face, the warmth and wonder of a loving heart (p.261).

Despite Camus's critic of the logical connections of faith and the pandemic, his view on our shared dignity to fight the oppression brought about the pandemic as a moral imperative is a Christian commitment to solidarity founded on loving relationships with others (Wagner, 2020). This commitment reminisces the role of the Church in solidarity as stated in Catechism of the Catholic Church (1939) as well as the Social Teachings of the Church such as *Rerum Novarum* of Leo XIII (1891) and *Quadragesimo Anno* of Pius XI (1931). This commitment to solidarity was summarized by St. John Paul II specifically as the love or preference for the poor, which can be expressed in the recent time as the least privileged humanity such as those who are economically and financially deprived, and people who are sick and afflicted because of the pandemic (Bednarik, 2013).

II. CONCLUSION

It is no accident that the pandemic of the century mirrors *The Plague* of Albert Camus (1947) about the unprecedented bubonic plague in the town of Oran which disrupts social mobility. Both pandemics threaten the fragility of human life in the face of an invisible enemy and humanity shares a common sentiment of existential crisis as the aftermath of physical disengagement, isolation, and lockdown protocol imposed by the government as precautionary measures in response to the increasing number of infections. Furthermore, both events unveils the truth about the vulnerability of human life to undergo such a crisis

unexpectedly despite the technological and scientific advancement of the century. In *The Plague* Albert Camus reminds us about this evolving reality of the virus.

The Plague *bacillus* never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day will come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city. (p.278)

Despite the pessimistic destiny of human life to undergo such a struggle to survive, an optimistic assurance of life in the future can be expected as long as humans learn the lessons brought about by the devastating effects of the pandemic. The deadly effects of the coronavirus at present may be prevented or minimized if the prediction of *The Plague* was taken seriously. Although it is not the case, humanity can still hope of overcoming the tragedy that befall us through the experiences of the past as a moral compass of handling the like event in the future and the power of prayer as suggested by Pope Francis as an essential element in restoring hope in the struggle for survival.

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