

Managing crises: Embracing risks to enable fullness of life

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The pandemic of Covid-19 aroused varied responses in India. While some people shut themselves off out of intense fear, a few brave people along with some organizations and communities risked their lives to offer material and spiritual assistance to those in need. **Uddhar Vikas Sans-tha**, a development and humanitarian non-government organization of the **Religious of Jesus and Mary**, Pune province, mobilized their staff of different faiths to think of creative and relevant strategies to reach out to the people at the margins. Going door to door masked and taking all the necessary precautions of social distancing and sanitization they visited the families in the slums, carried out surveys, empathized with the people, offered them necessary provisions, and involved them in their own upliftment through training and income-generation activities. This relates well with the prophetic response of Mary of Nazareth who rose to address the crisis at Cana. Reflecting on Mary of Nazareth and **Uddhar Vikas Sanstha**, this chapter demonstrates how managing crises is an urgent call to take risks and initiate strategies to enable fullness of life for oneself and others through support, sensitization, and solidarity.

Introduction

While any crisis is a type of small or big disaster causing disruption and distress, it can also be seen as a threshold or turning point challenging us to stop, look back, introspect, and take the risk to plan and plunge forward. The Covid-19 pandemic interrupted the habitual way of functioning and forced the world to usher in a *new normal*. Coping with the crisis is a way of dealing with the situation through positive or negative coping mechanisms and strategies. Managing the crisis, however, goes a step further to perceive the different dynamics, get people involved, and discern together how to respond to the situation. From a practical theological perspective, it involves a continuous process of connecting with people, conscientizing them, and capacitating them to participate in collaborative action. Initially there is need for immediate action to be taken but then with careful discernment more prudent deci-

sions can be undertaken to respond to the crisis and restore harmony.

Crisis management

Most disciplines today have a fairly similar understanding of crises and crisis management though they may not all agree on the nature, causes, and responses to the crisis. It is thus necessary to first understand what we mean by crisis and crisis management.

Understanding crisis

Generally, any crisis is complex, multifaceted, and causes disruption and disturbance to the normal functioning of individuals, groups, or the entire social system. According to Arjen Boin from the Crisis Research Centre in The Netherlands, a “crisis occurs

when the institutional structure of a social system experiences a relatively strong decline in legitimacy as its central service functions are impaired or suffer from overload” (Boin 2004, p.168). Crises can occur from natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes, epidemics, outbreaks of disease or due to accidents, human failings, scientific and technological catastrophes, and so on. Since crises bring about fear, uncertainty, and stress, many people resort to diverse coping mechanisms and strategies to reduce the stress. While crises are inevitable and normal, there are many factors that are responsible. For Boin (2004), at the micro-level it is about individual factors and human frailties, at the meso-level it concerns organizational factors and processes, and at the macro-level it is more complicated with powerful interconnected factors playing a strong role. While most crises have dysfunctional and undesirable consequences, they also offer opportunities for change, renewal, revised policies, and transformation. Since crises can disrupt and uncover the limitations of the structure and process of practical reason, it will necessarily lead to transformation.

Another issue with understanding any crisis concerns the subjective perceptions of the crisis, which may differ depending on the amount of threat or harm experienced. This results in the urgency and type of responses to the crisis. From a subjective assessment there are two broad perspectives to any crisis: “the operational perspective that concentrates on the management of the crisis itself and the political-symbolic perspective that tries to map out how crisis managers and the rest of us make sense of the crisis” (Boin, p.167). These perspectives are limited to the individual perception of the situation and do not guarantee any timely responses. Taking the objective reality of the crisis into consideration, in this case the Covid-19 pandemic, it is thus important to look at how the crisis is effectively managed.

Managing crisis

Although crisis management comprises of prevention, preparation, and taking immediate decisions, it also involves a complex process of staying in control, having a good sense of the crisis, looking at all the different factors, and involving others in arriving at an effective, balanced option on how to respond to the crisis. As there could be many stakeholders who share a role in the intricate organization and implementation of appropriate decisions, crisis management must not be the exclusive domain of

only the government officials and their agencies (Boin 2004). It calls for shared responsibility in reflecting, planning, and executing any decisions.

From a practical theological standpoint, managing crises concerns moral, social, ethical, and pastoral issues, and must include academics, church hierarchy, pastors, all the faithful as well as all people of good will. In practically every crisis it is usually the poor and vulnerable who are most affected and hence they need special care and attention. Any crisis also raises theological questions concerning the meaning of life, suffering, death, and the presence of God in the crisis, which calls for further reflection and responding.

Phases of crisis management

As such there can be three phases of crisis management – before, during, and after the crisis (Mitroff, Alpaslan and Green 2004, p.180). The first phase, the *before* or “proactive phase” consists in taking stock of the “organization’s crisis strengths, weaknesses, and vulnerabilities” and developing resilience and skills to manage the crisis. The second phase, the *during* or “reactive phase” is actually dealing with the crisis in a way that reduces any destruction and enables quick recovery, and the *after* or “preactive phase” assesses the effectiveness of the responses taken in order to prepare for any further crises. (p.180) Thus the *preactive phase* can also be seen as a preparation for the next *proactive phase*.

These three phases relate well with Osmer’s four tasks of practical theological interpretation: the “descriptive-empirical task”, the “interpretive task”, the “normative task”, and the “pragmatic task” (Osmer 2008, p.4). These four tasks correspond to some extent with the threefold CCC approach of *Compassionate Connecting-Critical Conscientizing-Collaborative Capacitating* that I developed for my doctoral research. However, this approach and the four tasks are not separate phases but interconnected. In the descriptive-empirical task, one does not only gather information and seek what is going on in the crises. One is present with the persons in the crises, compassionately connecting with them, listening, and attending to them with care and openness. The interpretive task is concerned with examining why things are happening in a particular way in the light of theories and other research. The normative task reflects on what must and ought to be done in accordance with God’s will as revealed in the Scriptures and other magisterial teachings. Finally, the pragmatic task deals with how to



come up with concrete pastoral plans and actions to respond strategically to the crisis.

How did Mary of Nazareth manage crises?

Mary encountered varied kinds of crises. In Lk 2:35, Simeon had already then predicted to Mary that a sword will pierce her own soul. Some crises concerned threats to her life and her son whereas others were more social and political. Mary as a young girl would have surely witnessed the violence of the peasant uprising and Roman suppression in Nazareth as well as the political and economic oppression by the ruling Roman administration (Johnson 2003). She and her family had to flee from Bethlehem to Egypt to escape King Herod's massacre of the male children (Mt 2:13-23). Mary may have had to endure great pain and suffering while journeying together with Jesus on the way to Calvary and standing at the foot of the cross (Jn 19: 25). In all these events we can see Mary's faith, her pondering and her acceptance of God's will.

When there was no wine at Cana, there was a different type of crisis causing embarrassment to the wedding hosts. Instead of just accommodating and coping with the situation, Mary of Nazareth saw the need of the moment and responded appropriately. She took the initiative and risk to request her son to perform a miracle while also making all the necessary arrangements to ensure that it would be done (Jn 2:1-11). While there is not much in the Bible about Mary of Nazareth, Elizabeth Johnson notes that "[w]alking by faith, not by sight, she composes her life as a friend of God and a prophet, one who actively partners the divine work of repairing the world" (2003, p.209) Mary can thus be considered an attentive seeker and contemplative in action. This is affirmed by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* where he portrays Mary as a model and star of evangelization in her "interplay of justice and tenderness, of contemplation and concern for others" (2015, §288). He notes: "Mary is able to recognize the traces of God's Spirit in events great and small. She constantly contemplates the mystery of God in our world, in human history and in our daily lives. She is the woman of prayer and work in Nazareth, and she is also Our Lady of Help, who sets out from her town 'with haste' (Lk 1:39) to be of service to others" (§288). Mary is thus a model and an example to all those who experience any crisis.

Responses to the Covid-19 crisis in India

Covid-19 took the world by surprise, affecting young and old, rich and poor, black and white. Nevertheless, the ones most affected are the poor and marginalized who have the least resources and social support. While the Indian government took advantage of the situation to come up with stringent laws, bills, and policies that to a great extent denied people of their rights and dishonored the socialist, secular, and democratic ethos of the country, there were some religious and secular organizations as well as people of good will who took risks to offer humanitarian assistance to migrants, slum dwellers, and others in need. They provided food, shelter, provisions, medicines, masks, and other amenities. Some institutions even started training domestic workers and other women with skills for alternate livelihoods.

These outreach initiatives correspond to some extent with the way Mary of Nazareth reached out to Elizabeth in the Gospel of Luke (Lk 1:39-56). Although the situation of Mary and Elizabeth was not a major crisis, it disrupted the normal functioning of their lives. Forgetful of self, Mary took a big risk in the first trimester of her pregnancy to be at the service of her older cousin Elizabeth. She hastened to attend to Elizabeth, assisting her not only with her daily chores but being a source of solace and strength to her. How beautiful it is when women can embrace and encourage each other! The human connection of physical presence, bonding, and support made it possible for them to engage in spiritual conversations, sharing their experiences of joy, pain, hope, and the challenging mission ahead. In their meeting they experienced the inbreaking of the Spirit in their wombs and in their entire being.

Following in the footsteps of Jesus and Mary, the coordinators of *Uddhar Vikas Sanstha* (UVS), a development and humanitarian non-government organization of the *Religious of Jesus and Mary*, Pune province, began to reflect on what God was calling them to do for the marginalized and those most affected in the face of the pandemic. The procedure and process adopted can be framed in keeping with the threefold approach of CCC explained in section 1.3.

Compassionate connecting

Compassionate Connecting with people entails moving out of one's position, privilege, and place to



engage with the other in their context and condition. It requires openness, sensitivity, understanding, care, and the courage to take risks. It involves acknowledging the worth of persons and treating them with dignity and respect. Marcus Mescher rightly states that compassion “is a bold gesture of vulnerability and tenderness that is radically countercultural in a social context that is more inclined to feign invulnerability and foment blame and rage. Compassion draws near the other as equals; this recognition of equality is essential for solidarity that can heal personal wounds and social breaches” (2020, p.186). Compassionate Connecting also includes engaging with people in their daily activities and enabling them to discover and experience the divine presence in their work, worship, and relationships.

The coordinators of UVS first connected with the social workers to reflect on the Covid-19 situation and come up with varied possibilities to respond to the situation. Some of the social workers themselves had lost their jobs in other places, and were now making a new beginning in UVS. They shared their experiences of the struggles they faced as well as what they observed in the vicinities where they lived. After some sharing and discussion, they decided to conduct an informal survey in the neighboring slums to pick out those who were most affected and see what they needed. Going door to door masked and taking all the necessary precautions of social distancing and sanitization, the social workers gathered not just information but empathized with the pain and suffering of the families in the slums.

They found that on account of unemployment and no means of livelihood, the people had no provisions, no proper electricity, and no support from others, since during the lockdowns they were not even allowed to leave their houses. If they ventured out of the house they were beaten by the police and sent back. The education of the children suffered as people did not have internet connection in the home and many could not afford mobile devices for all their children. Domestic violence increased leading to fear, mental harassment, divorce, and even some attempted suicides. Lack of hospital beds and oxygen led to deaths and orphaning of many children.

In one of the families the parents and grandparents both succumbed to the virus, leaving behind only their eleven-year daughter with a debt of twenty hundred thousand Indian rupees. In another case the only earning member of the family died after spending a month in a jumbo covid facility. The wife

was totally distraught having to manage her three children and in-laws. Many of the daily wage laborers, construction workers, and support staff lost their jobs. These are just some of the challenges faced by the people on the margins. Volumes can be written on the number of painful stories of loss of lives, jobs, basic necessities, friends, support, and even hope.

Constructive consciousness-raising

In my doctoral research I have used the term creative *conscientization* for this second step, taking the term from Paulo Freire’s liberative pedagogy. *Conscientization* or Consciousness-Raising is education for critical awareness which is essential for greater clarity and new insights that can lead to transformation. Constructive consciousness-raising involves critical reflection for resistance and liberative action. It is pedagogical in that it encourages those who are exploited and oppressed to become aware of the contradictions and dynamics operating within the socio-cultural, political, economic, and religious systems and to work with others in acting against them (Freire 2000, pp.88, 35).

The social workers, after carrying out surveys, organized seminars and workshops for some members of each family, in groups of thirty at a time, to give them awareness of the possible causes and effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and the preventive measures to be taken. They also educated them on how to maintain good health and hygiene and briefed them on the varied possibilities for employment. Each family received rations, medicines, and other material resources for immediate survival and sustenance. Educational support was offered to the students by paying their fees and providing the necessary digital resources to help them participate in online classes. Some arrangements were made to bring children from the slums in the school classrooms that were not being used, so that they could follow the lessons together from big screens. The social workers then initiated discussions on the prevailing situation and the concerns that needed to be addressed. Many suggestions were given by the people and it was good to see enthusiasm generated to begin again and move forward despite their losses.

Collaborative capacitating

Collaborative capacitating is about enabling those on the margins to participate in liberative action for



change and transformation. Shared spaces can be created to combine worship with the prophetic mission of working in solidarity to establish communities of resistance for justice, equality, and freedom. There is also a need to work in partnership with civil, social, and political movements to reframe policies and systems in favor of people at the margins.

The organizing team and the social workers met to discuss how to respond to some of the suggestions and concerns that came up during the workshops. In order to enable the families to be self-reliant, employment opportunities were provided to some very poor families and 'Learn & Earn' Income Generation Training was given especially to women. New opportunities were offered to the youth to learn computer programs by which they could work from home. Spoken English classes and preschool teacher training programs were offered to men and women so that they could help the little children at home to avail themselves of the online classes. More than training sessions and job opportunities, people found the space to connect with each other, share their stories, and experience strength, consolation, and renewed hope. It was heartening to see joy on the faces of the young and old. In fact, it also brought joy and life to the religious Sisters of my community who were locked in for months without any outlet for active ministry. As the schools were shut, they had no way to interact with the staff and students. Coming together also provided an opportunity to pray together and build community, especially since all the religious places were closed during the lockdowns.

In this way through their social outreach, the members of *Uddhar Vikas Sanstha* by taking risks to move out of their comfort zones enabled the inner (Religious Sisters) and outer (people in the slums) groups to experience joy, hope, and new life.

Reflecting theologically

Although there was no intentional theological reflections or spiritual practices carried out by the religious Sisters with the marginalized since it involved people of different faiths, it can be inferred that the entire response management process was in itself a manifestation of making present the reign of God or what practical theologian Ray Anderson calls *Christopraxis* (2001, p. 54). According to Anderson, "in Christopraxis, the act itself becomes the embodiment of a life of community and wholeness

that is derived from God himself through Christ" and reconciliation "is inextricably involved with revealing the power and presence of God through the act." Thus, it can be ascertained that the Sisters' prayer and intimacy with the Lord flowed into their reaching out to others making Christ tangibly present in and through them. In addition, reaching out to the people in distress was also a Spirit-filled encounter and experience for the religious women. The Sisters and social workers first connected compassionately with the people in the slums during the family visits and surveys, and listened to their stories of pain and suffering. They then met to reflect on the information they received and gathered the people together in small groups where they made them aware of the issues and concerns. Together they prayed, broke and shared bread, and discussed concrete plans to move forward.

In effectively managing the pandemic crisis within the prescribed Covid-19 health protocol and regulations, we can observe a certain theological, spiritual, and pastoral movement in the social outreach project of UVS from masking to making connections, from sanitization to sensitization, and from social distancing to solidarity. Making connections through social and spiritual support, sensitization, and solidarity connect with the threefold approach of CCC explained in section 3.

From masking to making connections

In psychological terms masking or putting on a mask is a protective coping mechanism to hide one's emotions, vulnerability, and true self in order to experience security and safety. However, in the obligatory wearing of masks, as prescribed by WHO and the government, the purpose was only to prevent the spread of the corona virus and not to hide one's true personality. Yet the face mask did offer varied benefits and banes. While ensuring protection, safety, freedom, and so-called confidence in relationships, it distances and creates barriers to communication and personal contact. It thus acts as "an interface that at the same time distances and connects the I-other relation" (Tateo 2021, p.135). At the same time, the mask does not prevent the possibility of making and maintaining connections with people.

Making connections involves an ethics and a spirituality of encounter. Pope Francis repeatedly refers to a culture of encounter in his homilies and addresses. In *Fratelli Tutti*, Francis speaks of going



beyond ourselves to encounter others through a welcoming attitude, care, and concern (1988, §48). He sees the importance of communication, dialogue, and listening to build good interpersonal relationships. Communication through dialogue is a significant dimension of any theological enterprise in the multi-cultural, multi-religious context of India. It provides an opportunity to discover the beauty and uniqueness in oneself, the other, and in the divine mystery manifesting itself in persons and all of reality. The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue speaks of four forms of dialogue –

- a) The dialogue of life, where people strive to live in an open and unneighborly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems, and preoccupations.
- b) The dialogue of action, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people.
- c) The dialogue of theological exchange, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other's spiritual values.
- d) The dialogue of religious experience, where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith, and ways of searching for God or the Absolute (Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue 1991, §42).

Making connections with people allows for a dialogue of life, action, exchange, and experience if one is open to understand, accept, and communicate with those who are different from one in many respects. Engaging in these four forms of dialogue with people of diverse religions, cultures, regions, and languages can bring about clarity and change in one's thinking, believing, and living to enable fullness of life for all involved.

From sanitization to sensitization

Sanitization is seen as most important to ensure proper hygiene for good health and safety during the Covid-19 pandemic. It protects oneself as well as others from getting the virus. However, along with sanitization there is also a great need for sensitization to the diverse aspects of the pandemic. People need to be made conscious of the social, economic, political, and religious dimensions of the pandemic and the involvement of different stakeholders along

with the related power dynamics. Raising accurate awareness of the situation can help people to think critically and become sensitive to what is going on. This alone can lead to concrete decisions for change and wholeness. Greater sensitization and sensitivity to people and situations can bring about compassion and interdependence. Compassion is nothing but being “sensitive enough to feel the suffering of other people, enough concern to care about their suffering, and enough commitment to act in a way that tries to alleviate their suffering” (Mescher 2020, p.186). Thus, sanitization of false beliefs and prejudices through sensitization to human rights and dignity can lead to sensitivity to the needs and concerns of people and the entire cosmos.

From social distancing to solidarity

As humans are social beings, maintaining social distance in the family, community, and public spaces was quite difficult for many people during this time of the pandemic. Nevertheless, like masking it also benefits introverts and individuals who prefer privacy and protection. Although physical and social distancing are meant only as a prevention to the spread of the virus they could lead to isolation, loneliness, and even depression and suicide. To counter this, it is important to build solidarity through social and spiritual support and sustenance. To work for the common good requires solidarity and subsidiarity while acknowledging diversity and difference. Solidarity goes beyond charity and paternalism to interdependence and inclusive love that can “generate a shared commitment to building a just ordering of society for the unity and integral development of the human family in right relationship” (Mescher 2020, p.81). This is affirmed by Pope Francis who sees true love as respecting every aspect of reality, since everything is related and connected in and for universal communion (*Laudato Si'*, §. 76, 92).

Conclusion

To sum up, Managing Crisis is a

Call to take
Risks and
Initiate
Strategies to
Enable fullness of Life through
Support, Sensitization, and Solidarity



Just as masking, sanitization, and social distancing are all necessary to prevent the spread of the virus and ensure good health, making connections, sensitization, and solidarity are crucial for wholeness and the flourishing of all persons and the entire ecosystem. We are invited today in the face of the pandemic to break boundaries and create compassionate connections of support between people of differing generations, classes, races, castes, genders, cultures, religions, and languages in order to sensitize ourselves and others to the signs of the times and collaborate in solidarity to enable fullness of life for all persons and care and healing for our wounded and groaning earth.

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