

Presidential Address
THEOLOGY RENEWING LIFE:
PROPHETIC INTERVENTIONS
AND ENDURING COMMITMENTS

MARÍA-PILAR AQUINO
University of San Diego
San Diego, California

This century will probably be named as “The Century of the COVID-19 Pandemic.” At the time of this presidential address,¹ the devastation on humans caused by this pandemic is massive, as illustrated by the staggering numbers reported by the World Health Organization: nearly 175.4 million confirmed cases and nearly 4 million deaths worldwide, with the Americas reporting the highest number of deaths at more than 1.8 million.² In the past two years, the impact of the pandemic has forced a reorganization of the routines in daily life for everyone around the world, including the structures of hospital and healthcare, education, commerce, leisure, religious services, and the whole network of social identities and relationships.

The pandemic has not simplified life for the CTSA as it has forced the cancellation of its 2020 in-person annual convention and the intricate structuring of its 2021 annual convention in electronic form, both events taking place for the first time in the history of the society. Commemorating the 75th Anniversary of the CTSA, this year we have gathered online for sharing thought around the theme, “*All You Who Labor...*” *Theology, Work, and Economy*, giving attention to the contemporary problems faced by the church and the world according to the society’s mission. Without doubt, Catholic theologians are faced with an unstable and ambivalent situation rife with anxiety and uncertainty which has simultaneously exposed both human fragility and the potentialities for a greater theological contribution to the construction of different modes of life.

My reflection this morning is framed within exploration of the relationship of theology and society, with attention to a situational context leading to discernment of the signs of the times, followed by consideration of theological epistemology within today’s dynamics of historical reality, and an approach to possibilities for the society’s theological labors. My main argument is that, if our theological scholarship seeks to

¹ I am grateful to my colleague and friend, biblical scholar Prof. Maria Pascuzzi, CSJ, for taking the time to read this paper for accuracy prior to its publication.

² World Health Organization, “WHO Coronavirus (Covid-19) Dashboard,” accessed June 13, 2021, <https://covid19.who.int/>.

continue being prophetic and meaningful in the next twenty-five years, it must give greater attention to theological approaches striving for cognitive justice. I close my reflection with an encouragement to engage theological work on utopias because thinking about the future with subversive and liberating faith-based utopias is an inseparable component of a prophetic theology. Naturally, I am confident in your understanding of the provisional mode of my reflections as some issues require further collective exploration as we engage in the tasks of building a new possible *alternative normal*.

A CONTEXT OF GLOBAL INEQUALITY

This generation has seen devastation around the world caused by the unbridled race of the four apocalyptic horses of war, plague, hunger, and death. Nobody has been left untouched. A panoramic listing of situational events shows that real life conditions have united peoples from all over the world in a shared sense of the heaviness of human existence, such as we have not seen in decades. In the past few years, in one way or another, people have witnessed what was once beyond the human imagination. Among other things, they have witnessed: military coups, massacres, police brutality, growing feminicide and violence against women under pandemic confinement, a persistent digital divide, right wing riots to protect the *status quo* and conspiracy theories that bring harm to democratic processes. They have witnessed record breaking weather patterns with unprecedented wildfires, severe winters, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, protracted drought, and an evolving climate crisis on a path of becoming a global environmental catastrophe threatening the human species and the whole of nature. The unrestrained expansion of global extractivist capitalism has exacerbated these conditions, furthering the consequent loss of biodiversity and sustainable environments.

In our region, while mass shootings and gun violence have proliferated this year, the US continues to be the largest military spender in the world, accounting for 39 percent of total military expenditure in 2020 with an estimated \$778 billion, representing an increase of 4.4 percent over 2019. “In 2020, the USA spent almost as much on its military as the next 12 largest spenders combined.”³ At the same time, the US continues to deal inadequately with issues of human mobility and migration as thousands of undocumented migrants and asylum seekers congregate at the southern border, with record numbers of unaccompanied migrant children. There is no clear response to this humanitarian crisis. An expert in transborder processes of the Colegio de la Frontera Norte in Tijuana, México, recently asserted that the current strategies are not addressing the root-causes of migration, such as poverty, violence, corruption, and environmental adversity. Foreign investment in the countries of origin is insufficient without the restructuring of democratic processes free from foreign

³ Diego Lopes da Silva, Nan Tian, and Alexandra Marksteiner, “Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2020,” Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *SIPRI Fact Sheet* April 2021, 3, accessed June 8, 2021, https://sipri.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/fs_2104_milex_0.pdf.

interventionism.⁴ Included in this situational panorama are the increase of fundamentalistic forms of religion, aggression, and hate against LGBTQIA+⁵ people to the point of officially denying the Catholic blessing of same-sex marriages, and sexual abuse in the Catholic Church.

The global COVID-19 pandemic, still unfolding as I speak, has generated responses that expose the power dynamics of a global system within which the global South is at disadvantage. This past month news outlets reported that “wealthy countries had secured more than 87 percent of COVID-19 vaccines, while poor countries had received only 0.2 percent. That imbalance has produced a stark contrast.”⁶ Seen together with a disproportionate response to climate change, this situation precludes any expectation that the health, well-being and security of the worldwide population will improve in the immediate future. As reported recently by expert studies, inequality appears to be the dominant characteristic of today’s world. In terms of human development in the 21st century, “in every country many people have little prospect for a better future. Lacking hope, purpose or dignity, they watch from society’s sidelines as they see others pull ahead to ever greater prosperity.”⁷ Today, the majority of the world’s population is an impoverished humanity facing no opportunities and no adequate resources to make decisions over their own lives.

Inequalities disproportionately affect social groups on the basis of, among other analytic and descriptive categories, class, race, ethnicity, age, cast, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, disability, migratory status, and geographical location. When examined in intersectional ways it becomes evident that some groups experience greater disadvantage. Without a doubt, “gender disparities are among the most entrenched forms of inequality everywhere.”⁸ Failure to articulate a collective action of global solidarity for opening opportunities across social groups and for sharing resources across nations will continue to bring harm to both the geopolitical North and the South. Considering the pervasiveness of global inequalities, the environmental crisis, and the deadly impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, social scientists from Ecuador speak about a generalized catastrophe of social systems.⁹ In the context of the US, Natalia Imperatori-Lee notes that “this pandemic has shed harsh light on our

⁴ Rosío Barajas, “La migración en los primeros 100 días de Biden,” Colegio de la Frontera Norte, April 29, 2021, <https://www.colef.mx/noticia/la-migracion-en-los-primeros-100-dias-de-biden/>; Nicole Narea, “America’s Asylum System is Broken. Here’s How Biden Could Fix It,” *Vox Media*, May 28, 2021, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/22442165/biden-border-asylum-crisis-children>.

⁵ An acronym that stands for: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and/or allies.

⁶ Jonathan Wolfe, “Coronavirus Briefing: What Happened Today,” *The New York Times*, accessed May 4, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com>.

⁷ United Nations Development Program, “Human Development Report 2019: Beyond Income, Beyond Averages, Beyond Today: Inequalities in Human Development in the 21st Century” (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2019), <http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2019.pdf>.

⁸ United Nations Development Program, “Human Development,” 12.

⁹ On this, see enlightening essays included in the journal “Pandemia y Crisis: Una Aproximación desde las Ciencias Sociales [*Pandemic and Crisis: An Approach from the Social Sciences*],” *Boletín Académico Sociología y Política Hoy* 4 (September-November 2020).

nation's empathy gap: our inability to move beyond individualism in our notions of freedom, of health, of prosperity" as people value, "above all else, inequality."¹⁰ In the face of human and environmental tragedy, a basic sense of empathy and interdependence appears to be missing from those who are sheltered by a culture of privilege. In the current panorama of global inequality and failing social systems, theology can only affirm that the major sign of the times of our era continues to be the wounded humanity that sustains resistance and struggles for change and transformation.

The contemporary context has also witnessed the vitality of global civil society in the intervention of large social movements for justice. The world became populated by social movements for change expressing publicly their anger, their resistance, and their struggle against forms of systemic injustice and dehumanization. As Achim Steiner writes in the 2019 Human Development Report, "the wave of demonstrations sweeping across countries is a clear sign that, for all our progress, something in our globalized society is not working," as with a varied degree of organization for collective action, "different triggers are bringing people onto the streets: the cost of a train ticket, the price of petrol, political demands for independence. A connecting thread, though, is deep and rising frustration with inequalities."¹¹ A storm of dissatisfaction is running throughout the planet, with inequality as the key to resentment and frustration. In courageous mobilization, grassroots people are no longer afraid of positioning themselves in the public arena of protest and rebellion. They are challenging the established political powers due to unmet fundamental needs and rights. The cry for justice and dignity is the common denominator that defines and unites them. Even if the causes and motivations of global unrest may be varied, excluded collectivities are voluntarily coming together with one purpose, namely, to assert the urgency of restructuring unjust social systems and relationships. The global justice movement brings to the world its subversive capacity to prefigure alternative possible futures. It also becomes a preferential site of critical thought. Today, any theology seeking to contribute to the historical forces seeking the renewal of life would need to engage the dynamics of the social movements for change.

Recently, two of the largest social movements expressing resistance, rebellion, and longing for constructive transformation are Black Lives Matter and Free Palestine. The Black Lives Matter movement not only demands the elimination of police brutality and

¹⁰ Natalia Imperatori-Lee, "What Coronavirus Taught Us About Inequality," *America Magazine*, February 15, 2021, <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2021/02/15/what-coronavirus-taught-us-catholic-inequality-239979>.

¹¹ Achim Steiner, "Foreword," in *Human Development Report 2019. Beyond Income, Beyond Averages, Beyond Today: Inequalities in Human Development in the 21st Century*, United Nations Development Programme (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2019), iii, accessed June 8, 2021, <http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2019.pdf>. For definitions and characteristics of "social movements," see David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, Hanspeter Kriesi, and Holly J. McCammon, "Introduction: Mapping and Opening Up the Terrain," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, Second edition, eds. David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, Hanspeter Kriesi, and Holly J. McCammon, 1-16 (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2019); Paul Almeida, *Social Movements: The Structure of Collective Mobilization* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019), 6-12.

systemic racism but also the radical transformation of the dominant cognitive patterns of power that have defined knowledge, humanity, and existence itself, which have their roots in white privilege and exclusion. Aware of this, the CTSA on its part, has made a strong commitment to furthering a theological contribution to racial justice. Black Lives Matter, along with numerous other social movements for justice and liberation,¹² has also exposed the interdependence and indivisibility of the struggles for social justice, racial justice, and cognitive justice. With George Floyd, nobody can breathe safely while global inequalities, state violence, and systemic racial injustice persist. A trend of coalitional links between Black Lives Matter and Free Palestine movements has been growing as signaled by the mural painted on the segregationist wall of Bethlehem, Palestine.¹³

The Free Palestine movement concerns the international struggles for the liberation of Palestinians. For generations, this people has continued to experience terror and assault perpetrated by the State of Israel, such as home demolitions, illegal land confiscation, intimidation strategies, terrorizing practices, illegal evictions, military raids, indiscriminate use of force, unjustified arrests, campaigns of ethnic cleansing, severe mobility restrictions, the blockade on Gaza, institutionalized cruel and degrading treatment of Palestinian detainees including children, the antagonistic wall, violence by Jewish settlers against the Palestinian population, and apartheid by a regime of Jewish supremacy. The persistent violation of international human rights law and international humanitarian law by the State of Israel, and the failure of the international community to hold Israel accountable have deepened the Palestinians' sense of insecurity, hopelessness, and injustice.¹⁴

In 2017, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) issued a report in which, based on scholarly inquiry and overwhelming evidence, the Commission established "beyond a reasonable doubt that Israel is guilty of policies and practices that constitute the crime of apartheid as legally defined in instruments of international law."¹⁵ To fail to recognize that the State of Israel has been

¹² As of today, the Global Protest Tracker reports a worldwide eruption of 230 "significant antigovernment protests" from 2017 to 2021, with 78 percent of significant protests in "authoritarian or authoritarian-leaning countries." See, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "Global Protest Tracker," accessed June 13, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/interactive/protest-tracker#>.

¹³ A large photo of the mural I mention here is presented in the news report by Russell Rickford, "How Black Lives Matter Reenergized Black-Palestinian Solidarity," *Vox News*, May 26, 2021, <https://www.vox.com/world/2021/5/26/22452967/palestine-gaza-protests-black-lives-matter-blm-solidarity-israel>. See also, Sean Sullivan and Cleve R. Wootson Jr., "From Ferguson to Palestine": How Black Lives Matter Changed the U.S. Debate on the Mideast," *The Washington Post*, May 22, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/gaza-violence-blm-democrats/2021/05/22/38a6186e-b980-11eb-a6b1-81296da0339b_story.html.

¹⁴ See, United Nations General Assembly, "Economic and Social Repercussions of the Israeli Occupation," Economic and Social Council, Seventy-First session, A/71/86-E/2016/13, May 10, 2016, <http://undocs.org/A/71/86>.

¹⁵ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, *Israeli Practices Towards the Palestinian People and the Question of Apartheid* (Beirut: United Nations House, 2017), 1, <https://www.unescwa.org/publications/publications/israeli-practices-palestinian-people-apartheid-occupation>.

enabled to continue perpetration of crimes against Palestinian families and communities largely due to the support with money and weapons provided by a militaristic United States of America is truly shameful. This is a pattern of vicious actions that keeps alive the memory of the decades-long US support of dictatorships in Latin America and the Caribbean, of its irrational wars in Southeast Asia. The support given by an imperialistic US to imperialistic Israel only exacerbates destructive violence globally.

In the past four weeks alone, 107,000 Palestinians were displaced from their homes by the Israeli bombardment of Gaza.¹⁶ As of 2019, the UN Refugee Agency reports 5.6-million registered Palestinian refugees¹⁷ who have been forcibly displaced as a result of Israeli occupation and illegal Jewish settlements on Palestinian land which settlers have aggressively appropriated. Today, more than 1.5-million Palestinians have been forced to live in refugee camps under precarious social conditions, with overcrowded spaces and insufficient provisions to meet basic human needs. In his open letter to US Christians, Palestinian Pastor Munther Isaac asserts that “for years, Christian-Jewish dialogue was misused to silence criticisms of Israel,” but if theology matters, “if any theology trumps the ethical-biblical teachings of Jesus on love, equality, and justice, then we must rethink that theology. If any theology produces apathy to injustice, it must be re-examined. Don’t describe Palestinian Christians’ efforts at creative resistance as criminal.”¹⁸

As for the urgent international recognition of the State of Palestine, the Vatican City recognizes this State and has officially accepted the Embassy of the State of Palestine to the Holy See.¹⁹ While Microsoft Bing Maps does label Palestine in its mapping technology and Google Maps has failed to label it, the current State of Israel shows a trend for the elimination of the Palestinian population from the face of the earth. Both the Holy See and the State of Palestine are non-member states of the UN but they hold a status of Observers in the sessions and the work of the UN General Assembly.²⁰ As of May 2021, more than 135 countries have officially recognized the State of Palestine as a “de jure (by law) sovereign state in the Middle East,”²¹ with active opposition from the US and the State of Israel. For historical reasons and for the theological imperatives of solidarity and care for the socially destitute, the Catholic theological community has an obligation of justice for the Palestinian people. For “how long will Catholics keep ignoring the suffering of Palestinians?”²² asks Michel

¹⁶ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “Gaza: Internally Displaced People 20 May 2021,” May 22, 2021, <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/gaza-internally-displaced-people-20-may-2021>.

¹⁷ United Nations Refugee Agency, *Global Trends. Forced Displacement in 2019* (Copenhagen: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2020), 2.

¹⁸ Munther Isaac, “An Open Letter to U.S. Christians from a Palestinian Pastor,” *Sojourners*, May 19, 2021, <https://sojo.net/articles/open-letter-us-christians-palestinian-pastor>.

¹⁹ See, Embassy of the State of Palestine to the Holy See, <http://palvaticanembassy.org/>.

²⁰ United Nations, “Non-Member States,” <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/non-member-states>.

²¹ World Population Review, “Countries that Recognize Palestine 2021,” accessed May 28, 2021, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/countries-that-recognize-palestine>.

²² Michel Sabbah, “Former Jerusalem Archbishop: How Long will Catholics Keep Ignoring the Suffering of Palestinians?,” *America Magazine*, accessed May 18, 2021,

Sabbah, Patriarch Emeritus of Jerusalem. Now is the time to unmask the lie that exposing the crimes of Israel against Palestinians constitute acts of anti-Semitism. Now is the time to increase promotion of the faith communities' intervention in civil society so that collective action is strengthened to stop the US governmental pattern of militaristic support of Israel and destructive violence around the world. Now is the time to collectively embrace a prophetic theological stand of unapologetic solidarity with Palestinians while they are still alive.

THEOLOGICAL EPISTEMOLOGY: READING THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

The complexity of today's context invited me to connect with the notion of "the theological dimension of historical reality." While this notion deserves a more careful discernment at another time, I am certain that CTSA members who are experts in the theology of Jesuit martyr Ignacio Ellacuría, S.J., such as Kevin F. Burke, Robert Lassalle-Klein, Michael E. Lee, and J. Matthew Ashley,²³ will recognize it as coming from Ellacuría's theological corpus. In their books, they present insightful analysis of the philosophical and theological intricacies involved in a proper understanding of that notion. I trust that they will support my reference to "the theological dimension of historical reality" as a notion that provides orientation for discerning the signs of the times within the contemporary dynamics of historical reality and for signaling the implications of that notion for theological epistemology.

According to Ellacuría,²⁴ all creation has been grafted with trinitarian life as an act of "self-giving by the divine life itself." While this grafting has limits inherent to how humanity and the world historicize trinitarian life in their creaturehood, it provides them with an essential openness to that life as a dynamism to make divine life ever more present. The theological dimension, explains Ellacuría, "would reside in that presence of the trinitarian life, which is intrinsic to all things, but which in human beings can be apprehended as reality and as the principle of personality." A greater presence of divine life within the dynamisms of historical processes is made possible by an active praxis aimed at both achieving social structures, bodies, and relationships that bring closer the experience of that life and countering obstacles and negation of divine life. This approach sheds light on discernment about "what there is of grace and

<https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2020/12/22/patriarch-sabbah-palestine-christians-israel-occupied-gaza-239511>.

²³ See, Kevin F. Burke, S.J., *The Ground Beneath the Cross: The Theology of Ignacio Ellacuría* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2000); Kevin F. Burke and Robert Lassalle-Klein, eds., *Love That Produces Hope: The Thought of Ignacio Ellacuría* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006); Michael E. Lee, *Bearing the Weight of Salvation: The Soteriology of Ignacio Ellacuría* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009); Michael E. Lee, ed., *Ignacio Ellacuría: Essays on History, Liberation, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013); J. Mathew Ashley, Kevin F. Burke, S.J., and Rodolfo Cardenal, S.J., eds., *A Grammar of Justice: The Legacy of Ignacio Ellacuría* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014); Robert Lassalle-Klein, *Blood and Ink: Ignacio Ellacuría, Jon Sobrino, and the Jesuit Martyrs of the University of Central America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014).

²⁴ On this paragraph, see: Ignacio Ellacuría, "The Historicity of Christian Salvation," in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, eds. Ignacio Ellacuría, S.J. and Jon Sobrino, S.J. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 276-278.

of sin in humanity and in history.” An active praxis becomes a necessary mediation to further the proximity of humanity and creation with the world of God as the giver of life. This is a *theological praxis* that serves the Reign of God, proclaimed and embodied by Jesus of Nazareth, as referential horizon, as utopian vision, and as grounds of Christian faith and hope.

For theological epistemology, *theological praxis*—as mediation of the theological dimension of historical reality—is understood as transformative action to induce historical actualizations of the Reign of God. While not always according to dialectic reason, a lucid *theological praxis* provides the richness of dynamic realities to theological theory which, with its own internal methodological protocols, in turn provides rectitude and improvement to *theological praxis* for the transcendent historization of God’s Reign.²⁵ It is not difficult to assert who are the primary social and ecclesial actors of such *theological praxis*. Those actors, found through an undisputed truth of the Gospel and of Christian faith, are the poor and the oppressed who personify the historical Jesus with greater clarity and who embody greater capacity for salvation. In Ellacuría’s view, “the fundamental texts of the Beatitudes and the Last Judgement, among others, leave this point settled with total clarity.” Those actors strengthen their inherent salvific-historical value as they become active subjects who embrace transformative obligations from circumstances of “destitution and structural injustice.”²⁶

Reflection on *theological praxis* is an issue of theological epistemology because, in Ellacuría’s thought, it involves the quest for coherence between theological conceptualization and *theological praxis*, so that both can be what they should be. *Theological praxis* contains a richness of historical experience, a wealth of grace and faith that come to fertilize an ever-renewing theological theory.²⁷ A crucial dimension for a relevant theological theory is *historicity*, which allows verification of proper *theological praxis*. According to Ellacuría, “a theology that is absolutely irrelevant to a given historical situation, in addition to undermining a required *theological praxis*, ceases to be an *intellectus fidei* to become a study of inoperativities.”²⁸ Both theological theory and *theological praxis* constitute a “virtuous circle”²⁹ for enlightening and strengthening the historical actualization of the Reign of God.

A further crucial dimension that a relevant theological theory cannot and should not neglect refers to the possibility that God’s revelation takes place among those who God wants, “especially among those who in the eyes of the world are not precisely the

²⁵ Ignacio Ellacuría, *Escritos Teológicos [Theological Writings]*, vol. I (San Salvador, El Salvador: UCA Editores-Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas, 2000), 235, 237-238.

²⁶ Ignacio Ellacuría, “Utopia and Prophecy in Latin America,” in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, eds. Ignacio Ellacuría, S.J. and Jon Sobrino, S.J. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 303.

²⁷ Ellacuría, *Escritos Teológicos*, 239-240.

²⁸ “Una teología absolutamente irrelevante para una situación histórica determinada, además de despotenciar la praxis teológica requerida, deja de ser un *intellectus fidei* para ser un estudio de inoperatividades,” Ellacuría, *Escritos Teológicos*, 241-242. Translations in this paper, to English from the original Spanish of *Escritos Teológicos*, where I have provided the original Spanish, are my own.

²⁹ “un círculo virtuoso,” Ellacuría, *Escritos Teológicos*, 242.

most academically learned.”³⁰ A point Paul the Apostle made almost two millennia ago (1 Cor 1:26-28). In this light, theological epistemology is called to interpret the signs of times in the practices and thoughts that best disclose the presence of the trinitarian life within the complexity of historical dynamics. That presence is found in the actualizations and longings of our communities for a new world of abundant life, a reconciled humanity, and a thriving creation. As theologians recognize, not every situational event is revelatory of the signs of the times. In the tradition of Catholic theology, the criterion for discerning the signs of the times continues to be the option for the poor and the oppressed, giving centrality to the promotion of justice as constitutive of Christian faith. This criterion guides theological interpretation for a proper relationship of theology and society as it seeks to influence hopeful historical dynamisms in the direction of an envisioned life-giving end. The task of theology deals with increasing hope and decreasing evil as much as possible. In the words of Charles E. Curran in his book about the CTSA’s story of seventy-five years, “our primary responsibility as a theological society is to theologize to the best of our abilities.”³¹

CATHOLIC THEOLOGY FOR COGNITIVE JUSTICE

In the early 1980’s, the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theology noted that official mainstream Christian theology, also identified as “traditional theology,” with its worldview wedded to Western European culture and to capitalism, has failed to provide “the motivation for opposing the evils of racism, sexism, capitalism, colonialism, and neocolonialism. It has failed to understand our religions, indigenous cultures, and traditions, and to relate to them in a respectful way.”³² Four decades later, while it is true that traditional malestream theology continues to have an influence on people’s minds and values, it is also true that a pluralism of counterhegemonic theological approaches has expanded across continents. This is encouraging for a theological work self-aware of its relevance and impact on the lives of people today. No documentary evidence is needed to assert that around the world, theologies have emerged in connection to the experiences of the marginalized in their aspirations for the renewal of the world and humanity.

Methodologically, those theologies share *theological praxis* as the starting point of conceptual articulation and faith-based principles of liberation as the grounds for theological meaning. They affirm theology as a life-giving discursive praxis that provides the reasons for hope and motivation for faith-based engagement in the historical processes that give impulse to the liberating force of the Gospel. Along the lines of the vision of a “healthy and open society” presented by Pope Francis’ encyclical letter *Fratelli Tutti*, these theologies refuse to consider as naïve utopias

³⁰ “especialmente a los que a los ojos del mundo no son precisamente los más académicamente sabios,” Ellacuría, *Escritos Teológicos*, 632.

³¹ Charles E. Curran, *The Catholic Theological Society of America. A Story of Seventy-Five Years* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2021), 123.

³² Ecumenical Association of Third World Theology, “The Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology Final Statement of the Fifth EATWOT Conference, New Delhi, August 17-29, 1981,” in *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology*, eds. Virginia Fabella and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 197.

every effort made at contributing to build a “beautiful polyhedral reality in which everyone has a place.”³³ In the past twenty-five years, the CTSA presidential addresses available in the *Proceedings*³⁴ offer plenty of insights for theological approaches that both affirm a prophetic function of theology in society and promote a theological contribution to open worldviews shaped by political charity, solidarity, and the common good.

In the relationship of theology and society, Catholic theology does not raise limits on the kind of constructive intervention that theologians may embrace in social processes. There should be no incompatibility but rather interdependent fertilization between the theologian in academics, the theologian in ecclesial ministry, and the theologian in civil society immersion as we all share a common mission for the renewal of life. Conceptualized as a critical reflection on *theological praxis* in light of revelation, the participation of theology in the global social movement for constructive transformation contributes to strengthening capacities for conflict transformation and for enlightened deliberation about compatible values, interests, and a mutually accepted course of action. Attending to the demands of context and as an active member of civil society and church, the theologian’s intervention may adopt a variety of functions such as “community organizer” and “listener in the community” as presented by Nichole Flores and Jennifer Owens-Jofré.³⁵ As recently expressed by Allan Figueroa Deck, we theologians must be out on the streets functioning as “ruckus-raisers.”³⁶

When we theologians do work within communities affected by inequality and structural injustice, one can further religious worldviews of justice and peace by functioning as activists, advocates, educators, unifiers, socializers, envisioners, peacebuilders, reconcilers, liturgical celebrants, policy developers, and coalition builders,³⁷ and also consider functions such as dissenter, agitator, rebel, subversive, and revolutionary. This is not foreign to the Christian tradition as the message of the

³³ Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (October 3, 2020), 184, 190, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html (hereafter cited as *FT*).

³⁴ The complete archives of the *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* can be found online at <https://www.ctsa-online.org/Proceedings>.

³⁵ Nichole Flores, “The Latinx Catholic Theologian as A Community Organizer,” and Jennifer Owens-Jofré, “The Latinx Catholic Theologian as Listener in the Community” (papers presented at the 2021 ACHTUS Colloquium Conversations of the Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians, Online Colloquium, May 14-15, 2021). This annual colloquium was organized by ACHTUS President Hossffman Ospino.

³⁶ See, Michael Sean Winters, “Latino Theologians get ‘in the Ministerial Trenches,’” *National Catholic Reporter*, accessed May 21, 2021, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/>.

³⁷ I have adapted some of these functions from the field of peacebuilding studies. See, John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace. Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997), 67-70; Thania Paffenholz and Christopher Spurk, “A Comprehensive Analytical Framework,” in *Civil Society & Peacebuilding. A Critical Assessment*, ed. Thania Paffenholz (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2010), 65-76; James H. Laue, “Ethical Considerations in Choosing Intervention Roles,” *Peace & Change*, vol. 8, Issue 2/3 (Summer 1982): 29-41. See also Charles Marsh, Shea Tuttle, and Daniel P. Rhodes, eds., *Can I Get a Witness? Thirteen Peacemakers, Community Builders, and Agitators for Faith and Justice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2019).

Gospel is revolutionary *per se*. In Ellacuría's view, beyond any singular function, this is a theological work that requires an appropriate *theological praxis* for a contribution to eliminating the structural sin of injustice, so that obstacles are removed for actualizing structures of grace.³⁸ He recalls the many times in which Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero mentioned that "the Church must walk behind the people, while announcing utopian futures, also pointing out the obstacles in the way."³⁹

The three-fold presupposition of this intervention is first, that the goals of the theologian's agenda are not determined by the established rules of dominant academia but by the goals of the social movement for constructive change; second, that such goals are infused by and aligned with the prophetic and social justice dynamics of the Catholic tradition; third, that intervention requires effecting a conceptual migration from the dominant Eurocentric sites of intellection—which largely result in perpetuating the cognitive traditions that validate structural patterns of hierarchy to benefit the supremacy of elite male actors with a deceptive claim of universalism—to the new sites of intellection focused on unfolding transformative knowledges of a diverse and interdependent world as provided by the subaltern actors striving for a just reconstruction of social structures and relationships with a sense of solidarity. Illustrative of this conceptual migration is the current effort to give centrality to the epistemologies of the South.

As defined by Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos, an activist scholar in the World Social Forum, "the epistemologies of the South concern the production of knowledges anchored in the experiences of resistance of all those social groups that have systematically suffered injustice, oppression, and destruction caused by capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy."⁴⁰ In terms of epistemological sites for cognitive construction, the term "South" is non geographical but only metaphorical "for the global, systemic, and unjust human suffering"⁴¹ endured by social groups that geographically exist in both the North and the South. Therefore, the epistemologies of the South are geographically found in both the North and the South as they involve, according to Sousa Santos, "cognitive processes concerning meaning, justification, and orientation of the struggle provided by those resisting and rebelling against oppression"⁴² caused by the systemic interlacing of capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has coined the term "kyriarchy" to name the intersectional, interlocking, and multiplicative dynamics of these structures of oppression that "crisscross and feed upon each other in wo/men's lives."⁴³ In addition to a rich variety of culturally-informed situational analysis, feminist theologians of

³⁸ Ellacuría, "The Historicity of Christian Salvation," 275.

³⁹ "la Iglesia debe ir detrás del pueblo, aunque anunciándole futuros utópicos y señalándole los tropiezos del camino," Ellacuría, *Escritos Teológicos*, 146.

⁴⁰ Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire. The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 1.

⁴¹ Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South. Justice Against Epistemicide* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2014), 222-223.

⁴² Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire*, 3.

⁴³ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Democratizing Biblical Studies. Toward an Emancipatory Educational Space* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 107; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Transforming Vision. Explorations in Feminist The*ology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), 9.

liberation have been developing for decades a critical systemic analysis of those interlocking and multiplicative systems of oppression for a theological contribution to transformative practices.⁴⁴

The intervention of many theologians in effecting a cognitive migration away from westernized supremacy and in building theological epistemologies of the South is a sign of hope. While the list of their names and works would be too long to list here, one must acknowledge the significant contribution to these dynamics made by feminist theologians of liberation and by theologians from the underrepresented members of the academy and church.⁴⁵ They have listened to the concerns of the oppressed, they have reflected critically about the mechanisms of injustice, and they have been resilient artisans in the creative and constructive articulation of new theological visions for the just restructuring of society and church. In compatibility with the goals, interests, and values of the global justice movement, with their critical and constructive theological epistemologies, racially diverse feminist theologians have forged new paths to envision ways for building together a better future where humans and creation can flourish.

In a gesture that I interpret as an embrace of the *theological dimension* of historical reality, the CTSA has made a significant move to strengthen connections with the theological epistemologies linked to those social and ecclesial actors who struggle, resist and rebel against oppression. Recognizing the contribution of contextually situated theologies within the CTSA and valuing the richness of interaction with theologies contextualized within the global South, in 2019 the Board approved institutional collaboration with the World Forum on Theologies of Liberation (WFTL).⁴⁶ The Forum shares with the CTSA concern about discerning the signs of the times for providing theological insights relevant to encouraging engagement in building global solidarity and prophetic intervention.

⁴⁴ See for example, M. Shawn Copeland, "The Interaction of Racism, Sexism, and Classism in Women's Exploitation," in *Women, Work and Poverty*, eds. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Anne Carr, 19-27 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1987); Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, "Final Statement of the 'Women Against Violence' Dialogue," in *Women Resisting Violence. Spirituality for Life*, eds. Mary John Mananzan, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, et al. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 180-181.

⁴⁵ See illustrative collective works: Mary Heather MacKinnon and Moni McIntyre, eds., *Readings in Ecology & Feminist Theology* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1995); Evelyn Monteiro, SC and Antoinette Gulzler, MM, eds., *Ecclesia of Women in Asia. Gathering the Voices of the Silenced* (Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge ISPCCK, 2005); Susan Abraham and Elena Procario-Foley, eds., *Frontiers in Catholic Feminist Theology: Shoulder to Shoulder* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009); Mary E. Hunt and Diann L. Neu, eds., *New Feminist Christianity: Many Voices, Many Views* (Woodstock, Vermont: SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2010); Mary McClintock Fulkerson and Sheila Briggs, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Elizabeth A. Johnson, ed., *The Strength of Her Witness. Jesus Christ in the Global Voices of Women* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016).

⁴⁶ The proposal for this collaboration was submitted by CTSA members Gerald M. Boodoo, Rufus Burnett, Jr., and Steven Battin, for consideration at the 2019 CTSA Board of Director's regular meeting in October. See also Gerald M. Boodoo, "Spaces of Possibility: Contributions of Local Theologies," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 74 (2019): 50.

Today more than ever, as theologians around the world share uncertainty about the future, this is a propitious time to assert a commonality of purpose in promoting theological perspectives in the Roman Catholic tradition that are attentive to contemporary problems faced by the poor and marginalized in the church and the world. Given that the Forum is interested in exploration of the relationship of theology and the global movement for justice, the connection of the CTSA with the WFTL brings hopeful opportunities for interaction with theological epistemologies inspired by principles of liberation and the option for the poor and marginalized. This relationship also supports the commonality of efforts in the work for cognitive justice and for theological contribution to constructive transformation in ecumenical, intercultural, and interreligious terms. Last year I was delighted to appoint Jaisy Joseph (Seattle University) and Rufus Burnett, Jr. (Fordham University) as the first CTSA representatives to the WFTL for a period of four years⁴⁷ beginning in January 2021.

There are other possibilities to signal tangible institutional support of the theological epistemologies that provide inspiration for prophetic involvement in the contemporary dynamics for cognitive justice. One possibility comes from an initiative by Past President Paul Lakeland. For the past three years he has been advocating the idea of creating an additional award to be presented occasionally to a theologian of a national or international reputation who is a non-member of the CTSA, in recognition of his or her lifetime contributions to Catholic theology. Providing support to this initiative would offer Society members the opportunity to welcome and recognize Catholic theologians from peripheral contexts and learn from them. A second possibility is presented by the convention program. While the merits of the established sessions are recognized, there should be no assumption of their permanence, nor of the amount of space they currently occupy in the convention structure. A restructuring of the program sessions in terms of assigning them a timeframe for conclusion or making them function on rotational terms would provide greater institutional space to address urgent issues such as sexual abuse in the Catholic Church on a more continual basis. Past President Lakeland has continued to encourage Society members to offer theological responses to this crucial issue.

A program restructuring is also necessary for a third possibility. A space of broader hospitality for the theological epistemologies of the underrepresented members of the society is needed in all sessions. This is not just to collectively move forward on issues of diversity and racial justice, but to assert a commitment to cognitive justice in theological terms. Our convention program sessions would become enriched by interaction with the counterhegemonic approaches articulated by those epistemologies from sites and visions engaged in overcoming the dehumanization and suffering caused by capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy. This is also necessary because the face of the society has changed significantly in the past twenty-five years if one considers that there were approximately 1,400 members in 1995.⁴⁸ From the underrepresented

⁴⁷ See the text approved by the CTSA Board of Directors on the relationship of the CTSA with the WFTL, with a job description for the CTSA Representatives, CTSA website, "Committees," <https://www.ctsa-online.org/Committees>.

⁴⁸ I was unable to find documentation for an accurate number of CTSA members in 1995. The closest documented number of the total membership was in 1992, with 1,471 members as

members today, according to the year in which members were accepted, only a few theologians—less than ten—joined the society by or before 1995, such as Jamie Phelps, O.P. (1988) Sixto J. García (1988), M. Shawn Copeland (1989), María Pilar Aquino (1992), Bryan N. Massingale (1992), Carmen Marie Nanko-Fernández (1993), Gerald Boodoo (1994), and Jean-Pierre Ruíz (1995).

After 1995, the number of underrepresented members of the society grew exponentially to include 58 Asian, 26 African, 23 African American/Black, 68 Hispanic/Latino, 3 Middle Eastern, 5 Pacific Islander, and 0 Native American, for an estimated total of 183 members out of a current total of 1,201 members.⁴⁹ But the number of underrepresented members could have greater accuracy if all members voluntarily disclose ethnicity in their member profile, which is something that we can only encourage. Greater visibility and impact can also be achieved by valuing the contributions of the CTSA Committee on Underrepresented Ethnic and Racial Groups (CUERG). This is a good occasion to express my gratitude for the spirit of protest, rebellion, and solidarity that the leadership and members of CUERG have manifested over the years because they keep the society alert on issues of justice and inclusion. For my reflection, the number of underrepresented members is important because I seek to assess theological production. For example, only considering published books, not including a truly extraordinary amount of book chapters and journal essays, the theological production of the society's underrepresented members amounts to approximately 295 books.⁵⁰ This number of books is probably higher because some members have also published books in other countries and in other languages not reflected in the US-based bibliographical channels.

Those books display a rich variety of writings within the whole spectrum of the biblical, theological, ethical, and historical scholarly areas, from early Christianity to eschatology, covering a wide variety of relevant issues, such as decolonial thought, migration, the diaspora experience, integral ecology, queer theology, sexuality, the ethics of science, interreligious dialogue, the HIV pandemic, spirituality, liberation, hospitality, reconciliation, and liturgy, among many others of interest today. The theological scholarship provided by the underrepresented members of the society in the past twenty-five years is not only abundant, sophisticated, and relevant, but it also brings to the fore emancipated knowledges at the service of faith-based humanization, care for our common home, and engagement in building a desired future of inclusion and life-abundant shared by all.

Countering the old colonialist idea of intellectual incompetency or cognitive deficiency, the disadvantaged members of the society are in fact, reshaping knowledge production in critical and hopeful terms. In providing theological responses to the

provided by: Robert J. Wister, "CTSA Membership Analysis," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 50 (1995): 302.

⁴⁹ The number of members in each category was provided by the CTSA database, which I have complemented with testimonials from other members.

⁵⁰ This number of books combines single-author and edited books. I have verified the proper bibliographical information of these books through various sources, including the Library of Congress website (<https://www.loc.gov>), the information provided by each member in the CTSA Members List, Amazon.com, university faculty websites, and information available on the Internet.

contemporary problems faced by the poor and marginalized in the church and the world, they are contributing significantly to advance the mission of the society. The theological scholarship provided by the underrepresented members can no longer be ignored. The task of working collaboratively for greater interaction with this scholarship belongs to all, so that non-hierarchical epistemologies have an opportunity to flourish. For the theological arena, racial justice and social justice can only evolve within the hospitable home of cognitive justice.

Society members still have plenty of work to do to advance the mission of the society in the next 25 years, even if predictions of failure may arise. But failure can only happen if the value of our actions is placed on a particular criterion of success, not on the actions themselves as witnesses to hope.⁵¹ Any predictions of success are condemned to fail because actual possibilities of success in today's deeply polarized and unjust world are none. The immensity of systemic domination and global inequality appears to be so unsurmountable that the work of Catholic theologians appears to be futile. But trust in the mystery of God's action for a renewed humanity and creation is also immense for Catholic theologians as the spirit of resurrection infuses the work and vocation of the theological community. By the standards of the elites in power two millennia ago, the Palestinian-born preacher and healer Jesus of Nazareth failed in his mission. Their success in killing the innocent became their ruin as they failed to see that Jesus was centered on actualizing the Reign of God through life-giving signs without concern for empirical evidence of success. Confronting the cross of death, God's action in raising Jesus Christ in glorious resurrection confirmed his life-giving actions restoring value, meaning, and force to his reconciling mission. According to Christian faith, as Maria Pascuzzi asserts, "God's resurrecting of Jesus initiates a new age which for believers also involves a resurrection to a new life in the present."⁵² This is the core of Christian faith in the God of Jesus Christ and the source of Christian hope.

As reported by Jamie T. Phelps in the 1995 *Proceedings* concerning the Black Catholic Theology Interest Group,⁵³ CTSA Past-President Bryan N. Massingale discussed the meaning of hope in connection to presumptions of failure, a discussion that he further expands in his book on *Racial Justice*. According to Massingale, faith-based hope "places human hope in an ultimate perspective by rooting it in the transcendent, the Divine. Religious hope addresses the question: Why should we risk failure and death for a justice we will never see and might well never come?," a perennial question that he addresses by stating that "in a paradoxical way, religious hope 'assures' the future by grounding it in the reality and promises of God."⁵⁴ As a God-given quality of the human spirit oriented towards an anticipated future of good and righteousness, hope is rooted in divine transcendence not in scientific empirical

⁵¹ See, Franz Hinkelammert, "El pesimismo esperanzado [*Hopeful Pessimism*]," *Cuadernos del Pensamiento Crítico Latinoamericano* 51 (2012): 1-4.

⁵² Maria Pascuzzi, C.S.J., "Paul, the Body and Resurrection," *Chicago Studies* 57 (2018): 41.

⁵³ Jamie T. Phelps, O.P., "Black Catholic Theology. Interest Group," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 50 (1995): 237-240.

⁵⁴ Bryan N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 150.

evidence. Sustained by hope, life-giving actions take place everywhere making possible the anticipation of new realities. The participation in God's work of restructuring unjust social relationships and systems could face failure only if an anticipated future would not exist, which is not the case for the Christian whose hope is grounded in resurrection. In Massingale's view, "human activity can delay, but cannot deny, the fruition of God's reign. Therefore, one can risk and endure "ultimate" failure—especially death—because from a religious perspective, temporal failures, though real, are neither final, decisive, or ultimate."⁵⁵

Collecting insights from Massingale's intervention in the CTSA Interest Group, Phelps writes that "theologians must move hope from the margins to the center of our concerns as a prerequisite for the theological grounding of an authentic emergence of a society of justice and inclusion, because 'without hope, justice will not prevail'."⁵⁶ In this light, the work of a Catholic theologian does not seek success that fits the criteria of the established disciplinary regimes which tend to kill the connection with the experiences and aspirations of those social groups that struggle for justice and resurrection. The value, meaning, and force of this work come from the vigilant engagement with those social groups as cognitive sites for theological epistemology not only because they embody the passion of Jesus today but also because they are the preferential carriers of the theological dimension of historical reality. Value and meaning come from the action itself of continuing to embrace one's theological identity through production of theologies that contribute to forging conditions of possibility for the full transformative force of the Gospel to occur in every area of personal and social life. By providing critical and disciplined reflection on questions arising from the experiences and aspirations of contemporary faith communities, as expressed by Massingale, theologians help the community "to clarify the convictions of faith, the demands of love, and the reasons for its hope in the God of Jesus Christ."⁵⁷ Infused by the vision and values of the Gospel, the reflective action of Catholic theologians today finds meaning and relevance in the process of offering resources to inspire, motivate, and justify involvement in constructive transformation for the renewal of humanity and the flourishing of creation. Against the death-dealing tendencies of oppressive systems, this is a way of enacting today Christian hope and the prophetic dynamism of the Catholic theological tradition.

CONCLUSION: UTOPIAN VISIONS

In the quest for mediums to advance the Reign of God in union with Jesus Christ and led by the Holy Spirit, Catholic theologians cannot accept the dystopian future prefigured by the dynamics of capitalist patriarchal colonialism. Both the convention program and the presidential addresses in the past twenty-five years have not been welcoming toward the notion of utopia. Today and tomorrow, however, the work of theology cannot afford to relinquish the fashioning of subversive and liberating utopias because a theology without utopias cannot assist in overcoming the many barriers standing against the building of new realities according to God's design. Christian faith

⁵⁵ Massingale, *Racial Justice*, 150.

⁵⁶ Phelps, "Black Catholic Theology," 238. See also Massingale, *Racial Justice*, 150.

⁵⁷ Massingale, *Racial Justice*, 158.

with no hope for alternatives is dead. The Christian experience of discipleship in a world of adversity and destitution cannot forsake utopian visions. While the term utopia initiated within the Western European world, utopian imagination has been deeply rooted within the peoples affected by old and new forms of injustice and oppression, such as the centuries old visions of freedom by Black slaves, or visions of emancipation by autochthonous peoples in the Americas, or visions of a life free from violence by women, and visions of radical human dignity by the gay community around the globe. Visions from the Christian grassroots of a new heaven and a new earth in which God “will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain” (Rev 21: 1, 4) have anchored their hope.

While it is true that humans have no power over the historical feasibility of an envisioned ultimate good, they have existential confidence in the collective force of resistance and rebellion against destructive and dehumanizing powers. For the Christian, the principle of certitude guiding historical action is the Reign of God as the ultimate horizon. Considering the precariousness of human existence, utopian visions impelled by Christian hope serve as orienting lights for the faith community in its journey towards the Reign of God. This is a process of engagement with a limited historical reality which *per se* remains open to the possibilities of a promised future of shared joy and abundant life. The contents of a prophetic utopia enlighten discernment of personal and collective *theological praxis* about those possibilities from the limitations of the existing circumstances. Critical faith-based utopias are needed to counter the determinism of market economy, the sacralization of patriarchal reason, the perpetuation of racist colonial politics, and the hopelessness of grassroots communities. More importantly, they are needed to enliven the bridge between the emancipated possibilities of the present life and the imagined future of a thriving life to come.

In the name of the non-historical feasibility of liberating utopias, theology cannot condemn them or renounce to them because it cannot relinquish the quest for hopeful alternatives. The theologian cannot afford to sacrifice critical utopias claiming the impossibility of strategic calculation to attain success. The criterion to discern alternatives is not provided by speculative westernized utopian philosophies but by the practices of those social groups working to transform systems of oppression. For the Catholic theological community, critical reflection on those practices in light of the Gospel entails continual attention to enduring theological commitments, such as the defense of human dignity, the promotion of the common good, the pursuit of social and racial justice, the protection of human security, the cultivation of sustainable communities, the recovery of the environment, the rejection of idolatries, and the affirmation of people over markets. The theological articulation of utopian visions serves to offer a coherent set of faith-based reasons for responding intelligently to the questions about how to live a life worthy of the human as created in the image of God with responsibility for the self, for others and for the environment around us. This is a way of providing not only constructive responses to the contemporary problems of the church and the world but also plenty of insight for spiritualities of solidarity and compassion.

This year Society members gather to celebrate the 75th Anniversary of the CTSA. Embracing the grief and anguish of our communities in today’s reality marked by

global inequality and a deadly worldwide pandemic, together with you I also embrace the joys and hopes of our shared commitment to advance the mission of the society in the next twenty-five years. The centennial anniversary promises to celebrate the prophetic and hopeful mission of Catholic theologians of renewing life. Against pessimism and shared anxiety, the story to be remembered in the future will be about what we theologians are doing today. This is a narrative of hope about a promising future as already grafted into our present.