

# The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Peruvian Catholic Church: A New Stage in Its Reception of Vatican II?

Juan Miguel Espinoza Portocarrero  
*School of Theology & Ministry, Boston College (Boston, Massachusetts)*  
*Pontifical Catholic University of Peru (Lima, Peru)*

Pope Francis described the current pandemic as “a time of great uncertainty” that contains both danger and opportunity. In his words, the whole of humanity has “the opportunity to move out from the danger” if we acknowledge that what we are living through is “a place of conversion [...] so let’s not let it slip from us, and let’s move ahead.”<sup>1</sup> The Catholic Church cannot be separate from this dynamic, particularly because COVID-19 is affecting the life of the Church and transforming it radically. Therefore, an examination of conscience is needed to discover the Holy Spirit’s call for an ecclesial conversion that should begin by engaging with the sufferings and hopes emerging from the pandemic.

As Pope Francis affirms, local churches have a particular role in this regard because they are “the primary subject of evangelization since they are the concrete manifestation of the one Church in one specific place.”<sup>2</sup> In Francis’ understanding, to fulfill its mission, each local church should immerse itself in a “missionary conversion”. However, such a process

---

<sup>1</sup> Austen Ivereigh, «“A Time of Great Uncertainty”: An Interview with Pope Francis», *Commonweal. Religion, Politics, Culture*, mayo de 2020, 27-28.

<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, «*Evangelii Gaudium: Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World*», 2013 §30.

# ESPINOZA PORTOCARRERO: THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

is relevant *not only* for the specific context of such ecclesial community, but it also nourishes the ongoing discernment of the Universal Church by offering new challenges, questions, and models. This paper examines the Peruvian Catholic Church's responses to COVID-19, and how the present historical circumstances might constitute a new stage of the Peruvian Church's reception of Vatican II. By presenting this case, my objective is to raise concerns that, even though they are contextualized in my own home country of Peru, might be relevant for a broader conversation about how the Global Church is facing the COVID-19 crisis.

I will begin this essay by explaining why my assessment of the Peruvian Church's response to the current pandemic is connected to the reception of Vatican II. The last ecumenical council highlighted the historicity of the Christian message and the need for pastoral adaptations to the cultural settings where the Gospel is proclaimed. This ecclesial event constructed a vision of renewing and reforming the Catholic Church in the light of a dialogue between Christian tradition and the "signs of the times," as it was phrased in the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*. This makes the council not a closed event but an ongoing process in which the Church receives and implements Vatican II's core message, that according to *Lumen Gentium* 1, is that the Church is called to be the sacrament of God's love in our world.<sup>3</sup> It also recovered the notion of the local or particular Church as the embodiment of the Universal Church in a concrete reality.<sup>4</sup> According to Vatican II, the local church is precisely the place where this ongoing engagement with the world and

---

<sup>3</sup> Ormond Rush, *The Vision of Vatican II: Its Fundamental Principles* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2019); Peter Hünemann, «El Vaticano II como giro en la teología del siglo XX: Irrupción del pensamiento histórico y cambio en la experiencia de la realidad», in *El Vaticano II como software de la Iglesia actual* (Santiago de Chile: Centro Teológico Manuel Larraín, 2014), 41-70; Christoph Theobald, «The Principle of Pastoralism at Vatican II: Challenges of a Prospective Interpretation of the Council», in *The Legacy of Vatican II*, ed. Massimo Faggioli y Andrea Vicini (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2015), 26-37.

<sup>4</sup> Second Vatican Council, «Christus Dominus: Decree concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church», 28 de octubre de 1965 §11; «Lumen Gentium: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church», 1964 §23.

## ESPINOZA PORTOCARRERO: THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

rethinking of the Church's mission take place.<sup>5</sup> In the Latin America Church, the way of proceeding as proposed by the Council was first received in the 1968 General Conference of Bishops in Medellín, Colombia and since then it has become a distinctive mark of this regional Church.<sup>6</sup> In order to understand my argument, it is important to situate the Church in Peru in this broader historical and ecclesial process.

Now, I will examine the Peruvian case. Although the Peruvian government was the first in South America to put in place a lockdown and gave a quick response to avoid the spread of the virus, Peru quickly became one of the world's worst coronavirus hot spots. A report on November 2<sup>nd</sup> indicated that my country had 906,000 cases and 34,585 deaths. Some experts say those number understate the real extent of the pandemic. The number of casualties might be double that, which puts the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic at the same level as Peru's internal armed conflict during the 1980s that left around 69,000 fatal victims.<sup>7</sup> Peru is number twelve in the world for most cases and among the first countries in number of deaths per million of inhabitants.

The impact of COVID-19 in Peru goes beyond the public health crisis. The image of a "success story" of economic progress that has surrounded the national narrative and the international image of Peru has been shattered by the pandemic. Deep-rooted inequalities and corruption have been exposed. I live in a country where more than 70% of jobs are in

---

<sup>5</sup> Ormond Rush, «The Church Local and Universal and the Communion of the Faithful», in *The Realist's Church*, ed. Christopher Denny (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 117-30.

<sup>6</sup> Segundo Galilea, «Ejemplo de recepción selectiva y creativa del Concilio: América Latina en las conferencias de Medellín y Puebla», in *La recepción del Vaticano II*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo y Jean-Pierre Jossua (Madrid: Ediciones Cristiandad, 1987); Carlos Schickendantz, «Único ejemplo de una recepción continental del Vaticano II. Convocatoria, desarrollo y estatuto eclesial-jurídico de la Conferencia de Medellín (1968)», *Teología*, n.º 108 (2012): 25-53; Carlos Schickendantz, «Un enfoque empírico-teológico. En el método, el secreto de Medellín», *Teología y Vida*, n.º 58 (2017): 421-45.

<sup>7</sup> For an analysis of the history and impacts of the internal armed conflict in Peruvian society, see Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación, *Hatun Willakuy. Versión abreviada del Informe final de la Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación* (Lima: IDEHPUCP, MISEREOR, 2004).

## ESPINOZA PORTOCARRERO: THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

what economists refer to as the informal economy, only 40% of people have a bank account and many more do not have savings to fall back on, and where only half of homes have refrigerators. This severely impeded on many of the 32 million Peruvians' ability to respect the government's pandemic measures. As the New York Times summed up, two decades of economic growth lifted many incomes but brought few stable jobs and little health care investment, fostering conditions for the uncontrollable spread of COVID-19.<sup>8</sup> Despite the country's wealthy finances, structural deficiencies and social inequality have provoked a humanitarian emergency that has overwhelmed the State's capacity of attending it successfully.

Amid the dramatic effects of the current pandemic in Peru, the Catholic Church has acted as a witness to the core values of the Gospel by distributing humanitarian aid, providing spiritual accompaniment, and urging civil society to face the needs raised by COVID-19. In different regions of Peru, Catholics have embodied the image of a servant Church by carrying out initiatives to address the urgent and complex needs raised by the pandemic.<sup>9</sup> By August 20<sup>th</sup>, the Catholic Church implemented 240 projects to contain the catastrophic social and economic effects of COVID-19. The Episcopal Conference also played a crucial role in organizing the multiple local efforts into projects with a national scope. Among them, three are particularly relevant: 1) "Dénles ustedes de comer" focused on food security, 2) "Respira Perú" which aims to fortify the Health Care Public System by donating medical equipment, and 3) "Resucita Perú Ahora" that is a social platform to encourage dialogue between faith-based organizations, organized civil society, universities, and public officers about how to promote better responses towards the pandemic.

---

<sup>8</sup> Mitra Taj y Anatoly Kurmanaev, «Virus Exposes Weak Links in Peru's Success Story», *The New York Times*, June 2, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Image Books, 2002), 81-94.

## ESPINOZA PORTOCARRERO: THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The Peruvian Church is uniquely situated to address the pandemic for a variety of reasons, two of which I highlight here. First, its understanding of the current crisis is sustained by an approach that promotes a sense of communal responsibility, empathy towards what the experiences of the whole community are, and the participation of social organizations, that differs from the government's approach that has been more focused in individual responsibility, policies disconnected from the people's realities, and social control. Second, because of its presence in all the national territory and particularly in the most impoverished areas, the Church possesses a social network that allows it to have direct contact with communities, diagnose concrete needs, and organize the distribution of humanitarian aid. The Diocesan Charities and other Catholic organizations have been the base that holds the display of such a valuable service to the nation.

This witness of a servant Church amid the pandemic must be understood in connection with the local reception of Vatican II and the Latin American magisterium during the 1970s and 1980s. After the council, the Peruvian Church developed pastoral structures and ecclesial networks that specialized in discerning the Church's relationship with, and services for, the world. During the military dictatorship (1968-1980), many priests, religious men and women, and lay movements advocated for political reforms regarding a fair distribution of wealth and the social awareness of the poor majorities. Historian Jeffrey Klaiber, S.J. explains how the Peruvian Bishops supported Catholic civic activism through the Episcopal Commission for Social Action as well as pastoral letters that read the Peruvian social reality in the light of Catholic Social Teaching and Latin American theology<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Jeffrey Klaiber, *La Iglesia en el Perú: su historia social desde la Independencia* (Lima: Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, 1996), 393-427.

# ESPINOZA PORTOCARRERO: THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

After more than a decade of military dictatorship, democracy was restored in 1980. Shortly after, however, and for the rest of the decade of the 1980s Peru faced an internal armed conflict between the Maoist guerrilla Shining Path and the state. Many dioceses and religious orders strongly denounced human rights violations perpetrated by the military and the terrorist group.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, during those decades is when the Catholic Church resituated its role in the public sphere as an autonomous and influential actor of civil society and assumed a critical position with regard to the State's insufficiencies.

In that regard, the Church's leadership during the pandemic is not a new phenomenon. It is the consequence of institutional resources and social capital developed over the past 50 years. The Church today is offering its historical strengths to the state and society. This is precisely Peru's reception of the spirit and texts of Vatican II. In this country, as in the rest of the Latin American Church, the emphasis has been placed on how the Church's mission is performed by the whole people of God. Its major challenge is to mobilize a praxis of liberation and justice against the sinful realities of poverty, violence, and inequality that poison the most Catholic region in the world. In other words, the reception of Vatican II in Latin America highlights the relationship with the world as the pastoral priority of how to embody the Christian faith. That understanding is grounded in the theology of the signs of the times (*Gaudium et Spes*) as well as the missionary Church as a constitutive dimension of the Church's nature as put forth by the Vatican II document *Ad gentes*.<sup>12</sup>

However, beyond the Peruvian Church's current social contribution, the pandemic presents opportunities for a new discernment of the "signs of the times." The whole people

---

<sup>11</sup> Cecilia Tovar, ed., *Ser Iglesia en tiempos de violencia* (Lima: Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Second Vatican Council, «Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World», 1965 §4, 11; «Ad Gentes: Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church», 1965 §2. [gentes\\_sp.html](#).

## ESPINOZA PORTOCARRERO: THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

of God in Peru is challenged to re-engage with the conciliar way of proceeding so it can authentically enter into the pastoral conversion towards Pope Francis' call in *Evangelii Gaudium* to the Universal Church to transform ecclesial structures “to make them more mission-oriented” for the service of our wounded world.<sup>13</sup> Specifically, I think that, as Peruvian Catholics, the pandemic encourages us to reflect on what Vatican II theologian Yves Congar teaches about the relationship between the Church and the world. The people of God are called to serve the world and to learn from what the world can teach us.<sup>14</sup> We have been very efficient in addressing the first dimension but not always so open to the second one. More than ever, listening is key to discerning our role in the midst of the current pandemic. We need to become a listening and learning Church, because only then we will be able to recognize and discern the new pastoral challenges raised by these uncertain times and examine how to reinvigorate and update the ecclesial structures.

I will conclude by offering some insights that I consider important for this examination of conscience, that in my understanding are keys to introduce the Peruvian Church into a new stage of its reception of Vatican II. The first step must be listening to the ongoing events as a place where God's will is revealed. This exercise should be situated in the world of the poor and other peripheries. Additionally, listening needs to be oriented by an attitude of humility that allows the Church to distance itself from its certainties and securities, so it can be open to unlearning and relearning what the Church thinks is already well known. In brief, it is about implementing the synodal way of proceeding that Pope Francis has put in the core of the ecclesial praxis.

---

<sup>13</sup> Pope Francis, «*Evangelii Gaudium*» §27.

<sup>14</sup> Yves Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 131.

## ESPINOZA PORTOCARRERO: THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Second, by listening and learning from the present, the Peruvian Church can articulate an updated interpretation of the socio-political reality and a theology of the signs of the times according to that reality. This is key not only to reinvigorate pastoral structures but also to examine if Catholics dioceses and organizations are providing efficient, compassionate, and contextualized responses to the emergency. The theological and pastoral perspectives that guide the Church's social action today were developed during the 1970s and 1980s, and they no longer fully grasp how much Peru has changed in the last twenty-five years. Without pastoral criteria to guide the Church's commitment to social justice, we could fall into insufficient responses, ignore new problems emerging and its causes, or even reproduce rationales that are counterproductive to what we aim. For instance, the distribution of humanitarian aid, in which the Peruvian Church has played a crucial role during the pandemic, can turn into paternalism or assistentialism, and weaken the government's leadership in meeting its duty.

For these reasons, the Church needs to understand its public leadership beyond the role of a social care provider and articulate a public voice that denounces the structural causes underneath the dreadful impact of COVID-19 in Peru. Social and political critique is an element lacking in the Church's leadership in the pandemic—and element that, paradoxically, was central to the Church's way of engaging society during the decades after Vatican II. The virus exposed that a complete restructuring of the Peruvian economic and social system that causes all these grave inequalities is urgently needed. The Church's social work cannot be piecemeal but instead must advocate for structural reform.

One of the Church's strengths in response to COVID-19 has been supporting grassroots organizations in their collaborative initiatives to address the emerging needs. A



## ESPINOZA PORTOCARRERO: THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

valid question is how the Church could do more to promote social awareness among citizenship. Next year, elections will take place in Peru and the political debate is extremely vague. Political leaders and parties are not talking about the crucial issues but competing around how to impose their private interests. How can the Church's leadership be oriented to encourage a dialogue among the social fabric to imagine what country we want to become after the pandemic should concern the Church? How should this dialogue be performed, so that it does not focus only on the Church but rather centers the suffering of the poor and civil society's initiative?

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic is an invitation to the Church to rethink its own structures and the relationships they are built on. Church leadership will be truly credible only if first the Church embodies the values that it aspires to radiate to the whole Peruvian society. For instance, in a society where corruption functions like cancer that poisons all spheres, the Episcopal Conference can play a crucial role in criticizing corruption in the government and other institutions. The Church must show that it is accountable for its resources and decisions. This attitude is essential because, during the emergency, the Catholic Charities have received many donations, a sign that people trust the Church. However, that confidence deserves public reports on what resources were received, how they have been used, and who the donors are. After eight months of emergency, until now, there has been no official report that systematizes the humanitarian aid provided by the Church. Accountability is a concrete sign of growing as a synodal Church that the Peruvian Church could embody more clearly.

Finally, the whole people of God should be committed in this ecclesial discernment and reform. During the emergency, the bishops have been the leading figures. It is time to

# ESPINOZA PORTOCARRERO: THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

promote lay people's leadership -especially female leadership- to genuinely embody a Synodal Church where everyone's voice and contribution are valued. In brief, this new stage of the Peruvian Church's reception of Vatican II should be grounded in its historical legacy and open to the pandemic's unique challenges. This local Church is called to a new discernment of the signs of the times that ought to lead the Church to understand itself not as a charitable institution, but instead as a liberating structure. In order to achieve that, the Church requires to change itself from within as well as denounce the inequalities that exist in the Church and the world.

This new ecclesial discernment should be lived as a response to the Holy Spirit acting in the midst of the current crisis to transform us into a Church deeply rooted in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We can make our own the words revealed to the prophet Ezekiel: "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you, and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh" (36:26). May the Peruvian Church, in communion with Pope Francis and the Universal Church, listen and embrace this call for a new discernment of the sign of the times as a way to historize God's Kingdom amid a wounded world.

## Bibliography

- Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación. *Hatun Willakuy. Versión abreviada del Informe final de la Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación*. Lima: IDEHPUCP, MISEREOR, 2004.
- Congar, Yves. *True and False Reform in the Church*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011.
- Dulles, Avery. *Models of the Church*. New York: Image Books, 2002.
- Galilea, Segundo. «Ejemplo de recepción selectiva y creativa del Concilio: América Latina en las conferencias de Medellín y Puebla». In *La recepción del Vaticano II*, edited by Giuseppe Alberigo y Jean-Pierre Jossua. Madrid: Ediciones Cristiandad, 1987.
- Hünemann, Peter. «El Vaticano II como giro en la teología del siglo XX: Irrupción del pensamiento histórico y cambio en la experiencia de la realidad». In *El Vaticano II*

# ESPINOZA PORTOCARRERO: THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

- como software de la Iglesia actual*, 41-70. Series Teología de los tiempos 15. Santiago de Chile: Centro Teológico Manuel Larraín, 2014.
- Ivereigh, Austen. «“A Time of Great Uncertainty”: An Interview with Pope Francis». *Commonweal. Religion, Politics, Culture* 147, n.º 5 (May 2020), pp. 24-28.
- Klaiber, Jeffrey. *La Iglesia en el Perú: su historia social desde la Independencia*. 3rd Ed. Lima: Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, 1996.
- Pope Francis. «Evangelii Gaudium: Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World», 2013. [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/es/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/es/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html).
- Rush, Ormond. «The Church Local and Universal and the Communion of the Faithful». In *The Realist’s Church*, edited by Christopher Denny, 117-30. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015.
- . *The Vision of Vatican II: Its Fundamental Principles*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2019.
- Schickendantz, Carlos. «Un enfoque empírico-teológico. En el método, el secreto de Medellín». *Teología y Vida*, n.º 58 (2017): 421-45.
- . «Único ejemplo de una recepción continental del Vaticano II. Convocatoria, desarrollo y estatuto eclesial-jurídico de la Conferencia de Medellín (1968)». *Teología*, n.º 108 (2012): 25-53.
- Second Vatican Council. «Ad Gentes: Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church», 1965. [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decre\\_19651207\\_ad-gentes\\_sp.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decre_19651207_ad-gentes_sp.html).
- . «Christus Dominus: Decree concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church», 1965. [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decre\\_19651028\\_christus-dominus\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decre_19651028_christus-dominus_en.html).
- . «Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World», 1965, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html)
- . «Lumen Gentium: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church», 1964. [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html).
- Taj, Mitra, & Anatoly Kurmanaev. «Virus Exposes Weak Links in Peru’s Success Story». *The New York Times*. June 2, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/12/world/americas/coronavirus-peru-inequality-corruption.html>.
- Theobald, Christoph. «The Principle of Pastoralty at Vatican II: Challenges of a Prospective Interpretation of the Council». In *The Legacy of Vatican II*, edited by Massimo Faggioli y Andrea Vicini, 26-37. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2015.
- Tovar, Cecilia, ed. *Ser Iglesia en tiempos de violencia*. Lima: Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones, 2006.