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Introduction

2020: DePaul University's Community Responds to Crises

Matthieu Brejon de Lavergnée, Ph.D.
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The Student Resource Center, located on the 11th floor, in the DePaul Center, which usually bustles with the presence of students, faculty, and staff, stands still during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic the week of March 22, 2020. During finals week of the winter quarter and into the spring quarter of 2020, DePaul instituted practices of social distancing, online classes and teleworking for all faculty, staff, and students.

Courtesy DePaul University/
Randall Spriggs



Summer's heat had boiled the confidence from the group, and this wintry weather had sapped their vitality so that they moved with the carefulness of the very old; and the strength with which they had started the trip—the almost insolent confidence they had in themselves as individuals was less than it was; in this final wringing-out of their endurance, they had an intimation of what weakness was, and they sat here together with the need of closeness very real in them, and came upon fraternity.

Ernest Haycox, *The Earthbreakers*, 1952

Wow, 2020! What a year it's been ..." voiced a DePaul student, certainly expressing what we all felt.¹ It was an unprecedented, disruptive year like no other whose effects have carried forward well into 2021. Think of how many words and phrases became overly familiar to us during these many months as a result: COVID-19, pandemic, quarantine, stay-at-home order, contact tracing, asymptomatic, immunity, vaccination pass, unvaccinated, variants, curves, peaks, and death count. There were also the many names, faces, and places: first responders, essential workers, the CDC, Dr. Anthony Fauci, pangolins, Pfizer, Moderna, and Wuhan. And then there were the words so often used at our own university: social distancing, masking up, hand sanitizing, testing, teleworking, remote teaching, Zoom meetings, virtual

¹ Division of Mission and Ministry, "Remembering the Year Past: Transitioning to Hope," DePaul University, streamed live on 11 March 2021, YouTube video, at: [Remembering the Year Past: Transitioning to Hope](#).

(everything), mental health, and the repeated invitations to patience, kindness, flexibility, resilience, and uplifting mantras like “We’re all in this together.”

What we did not know when the virus began to rapidly spread and the stay-at-home orders started in March 2020 was that our vocabulary would be further influenced by two other major events that followed: the murder of George Floyd on 25 May in Minneapolis; and then the presidential campaigns, the election, and the attack on the US Capitol on 6 January 2021. In late spring, the media and our daily conversations were flooded with terms and phrases like “Justice for George,” “I can’t breathe,” “Defund the police,” “Say Their Names,” Black Lives Matter, white supremacy, systematic violence, antiracism, protests, memorials, PWI (Predominantly White Institution), and DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion). Then, summer and fall witnessed a curious presidential campaign full of vitriolic tweets, claims of fake news and stolen votes, nationalistic rhetoric, questions of morality, and political corruption. Many believed “neo-fascists,” or alternately the “radical left,” were attempting to take over the country. I have never been so addicted to TV shows, breaking news, newspapers, special editions, and the continuous (mis)information of social media than in 2020. It was a maelstrom wherein everything spun and became dizzying.

On 27 March 2020, A. Gabriel Esteban, PhD, DePaul University’s president, denounced the increasingly hurtful use of language in one of his first statements on the pandemic:

Language that describes COVID-19 as a “Chinese Virus,” “Wuhan Virus,” or “Kung Flu” is unacceptable. Terms like these, which have been used by some of our nation’s leaders and members of the media, are xenophobic and can only feed into spreading fear, hatred, and violence. As a result, we have seen an escalation of attacks these past two months against Asian communities and individuals across the US, particularly against Chinese and East Asians.²

The pandemic, politics, and racism were already connected. Reflecting on the revolution of 1968, French Jesuit historian Michel de Certeau linked revolution and language: “Last May, we took the floor like we took the Bastille in 1789.”³ What we experienced in 2020 could be the sign of a cultural revolution, in which the pandemic certainly plays a most prominent part.

This is where the idea for this special issue of *Vincentian Heritage* came from. As it became clear we would not soon return to a then deserted and strangely silent campus, which

2 A. Gabriel Esteban, Ph.D., “From the President: Respect for All During and After the COVID-19 Crisis,” Newline, DePaul University, published 27 March 2020, at: <https://resources.depaul.edu/newline/sections/campus-and-community/Pages/Respect-for-all.aspx>.

3 Michel de Certeau, “Pour une nouvelle culture: prendre la parole,” *Études* 328 (June 1968): 29–42.

Racism is a Pandemic.

Student protesters take to the streets near the DePaul campus in early June 2020.

Courtesy of Matthieu Brejon de Lavergnée



contrasted to the increasingly divisive noise emerging online and in the media, I began to look for a way to connect with the DePaul community and reflect on what was happening. What had the experiences of the year meant for us, individually and as a community? Was it, as Provost Salma Ghanem would note, both “a year to forget and a year to remember?”⁴ Or, as Vincent de Paul once said, maybe we should “take as a maxim never to be surprised at current difficulties, no more than at a passing breeze, because with a little patience we shall see them disappear. Time changes everything.”⁵

I discussed this need for connection with Reverend Guillermo Campuzano, C.M., vice president of the Division of Mission and Ministry; Mark Laboe, the associate vice president for Faculty and Staff Engagement; and Nathaniel Michaud, director of the Vincentian Studies Institute. As a result, on 1 July 2020, we called out to the university community via Newslines and email with the following proposal:

2020: DePaul University’s Community Responds to Crises

The DePaul University Vincentian Studies Institute would like to invite everyone from our community—faculty, staff, students, and alumni—to participate in a special call to submit publishable materials dedicated to the

⁴ “Remembering the Year Past,” op. cit.

⁵ Letter 1075, “To Louis Rivet, Superior, in Saintes,” 15 November 1648, in Pierre Coste, C.M., *Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, ed. and trans. Jacqueline Kilar, D.C., Marie Poole, D.C., et. al., 14 vols. (New York: New City Press, 1985–2014), 3:382, at: https://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentian_ebooks/28/.

unprecedented crises we have been challenged to confront in 2020. COVID-19 has disrupted daily life and led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people worldwide. At DePaul it has forced us to change how we work, how we teach, and how we learn. How has it changed you? Our nation has also erupted in protests over the brutal killing of George Floyd. His senseless death has reignited the Black Lives Matter movement and challenges us as a people to dismantle inequality, oppression, and systemic racism in the pursuit of justice. How has this affected you, your colleagues, or your family? How has your perception of DePaul, of Chicago, of our country, been changed? Considering both crises and their effect on marginalized peoples how do we see that they interplay? How can we move forward? How can our Vincentian values help guide us through this time of great pain and suffering? Ultimately, we would like to know, how have we responded as a Vincentian higher learning community?

Readers of the *Heritage* may be surprised by this shift in direction. But what we are gathering in this issue can be identified as “immediate history.” It is a way to further our consciousness of the present and embrace what has been called the “post–COVID-19 world.” The hope is that this volume enlightens both our DePaul community and our external audience as we share contributed works that extend beyond the university and consider larger issues.

Dr. Esteban opens this collection of works by reflecting on the guiding principles of leading a university in challenging times, answering the famous Vincentian question “What must be done?” Rev. Campuzano then offers a theological perspective on our collective experience as members of a globalized and suffering world. As the cries of the earth and of the poor⁶ grow ever louder, what does it mean to strive for “systematic change?”

The next four works consider what has been done at DePaul University. As a teaching institution, DePaul gave priority to its students. Lin Batsheva Kahn created a splendid online visual exhibit based on selected student pieces produced in her course *Creativity and Adversity*. Artwork, texts, and the music *Transcending* articulate their thoughts about learning and creating during a global pandemic and redirecting hardships into creativity.⁷ Jane Eva Baxter, Margaret Storey, et al., present their innovative interdisciplinary and online course designed and presented by a large and diverse team of faculty and staff. Student projects are also shared as a way to record their 2020 voices. In their handmade maps

6 Francis, §49, *Laudato Si': On Care For Our Common Home*, 24 May 2015, available at: [On Care For Our Common Home](#).

7 See also the piece “Reaching” by Diane Faltinschi, featured in DePaul Newline on 18 June 2020.

and artworks, it is striking to note how powerful visual thinking can be when addressing complex issues. Next, Rubén Álvarez Silva, et al., of the Steans Center document how they answered the challenge to safely engage students when they were no longer attending class in person. The center created a website called Online Community Engagement using modules on many issues such as mental health, community organizing, immigration rights, and police accountability.⁸ Reverend Dan Paul Borlik, C.M., and Amanda Thompson of the Division of Mission and Ministry illustrate how their practice of See/Judge/Act helped Generation Z cope with the pandemic. They reflect on the shock and chaos of students being asked to move out of the dorms within one week in March, and find echoes in the scriptures, especially the book of Exodus and its revelation of a “compassionate God.”

Moving beyond the university community, two papers address our larger Vincentian Family. Timothy P. Williams discusses how the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, with 100,000 members nationwide serving five million people every year, adapted to the challenges of connecting with people in need despite the pandemic. Members also launched a series of webinars and Zoom meetings to examine their own responsibilities when it comes to systematic racism and violence. Reverend J. Patrick Murphy, C.M., then describes how Depaul International staff provided services to homeless people—“the poorest of the poor”—during the crisis, both in the US and in a number of European countries. Both papers stress how these two nonprofit organizations found inspiration from the history of the Vincentian Family. Vincent de Paul and Frédéric Ozanam each faced epidemics and political turmoil, even social and political revolutions, during their lives.

Expanding our scope further, the last two papers introduce us to often hidden and forgotten worlds. Traci Schlesinger, whose recent passing has left us mourning a great loss, provides a rigorous statistical analysis of incarceration, COVID-19, and race. Her study makes a strong case that the intersection of the epidemic and incarceration has had unequal and devastating effects on Black and Latinx communities. To address racial disparities in infections and deaths, she recommends we rethink mass incarceration itself (while the US represents five percent of the world’s population, it is home to twenty-five percent of the world’s incarcerated population). Stan Chu Ilo’s article also discusses the twin crises of the pandemic and racism, and advocates for a global ethic of solidarity to address both problems. Could a place like DePaul University be a laboratory “to reinvent love as a praxis”? Based on what is happening in Africa, his reflection is extremely relevant to Western societies ready to open their eyes to the systemic injustices that have led Jesus to be crucified again and again.

⁸ See Irwin W. Steans Center, Online Community Engagement, at: [Online Community Engagement](#).

A poignant poem by Amaris Casiano-Zoko, photographs from contributors Stefania Cosentino and Olga Rozenbaum, and specially selected photos taken by Jeffrey Carrion, Randall Spriggs, and Maria Toscano of DePaul University Marketing and Communications round out our collection and provide further ways to consider and remember the year 2020. Facing three interconnected crises—the pandemic, racial injustice, and the challenges to our democracy—whose consequences will reverberate, what do we now want for the future? Perhaps we should look to the words of Pope Francis who offered his thoughts in the recent encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*:

If only we might rediscover once for all that we need one another, and that in this way our human family can experience a rebirth, with all its faces, all its hands and all its voices, beyond the walls that we have erected.⁹

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⁹ Francis, §35, *Fratelli Tutti: On Fraternity and Social Friendship*, 3 October 2020, available at: [On Fraternity and Social Friendship](#).