A Jesuit Perspective on Metaphors for COVID-19 in the Online Journal "Thinking Faith"

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Abstract. This article investigated how metaphors for COVID-19 were framed in a Catholic-based journal *Thinking Faith*. Data, consisting of 107 metaphors, were collected from the online journal and were analyzed within the Jesuit perspectives. Results showed that out of the 107 occurrences of metaphoric expressions for the pandemic, the source domains tend to have reflective and empowering aspects. The 12 main source domains of COVID-19 were **war**, **drama**, **tools**, **natural forces**, **journey**, **manageable item**, **teacher**, **other living beings**, **darkness**, **pain**, **threat**, and **signs of the times**. The coverage of *Thinking Faith* aimed to show the life-changing wisdom of the Gospel, Catholic Social Teaching, and Papal messages. Positive or neutral word choices of metaphors like **teacher**, **drama**, **journey**, **manageable items**, **natural forces**, and **signs of the times** managed to spark hopefulness for the journal readership. Meanwhile, the violence-related metaphors **war**, **pain**, and **threat** may appear to be discouraging. Overall, the metaphors used in the Jesuit online journal were contextually heartening.

Keywords: COVID-19; Jesuit perspective; metaphor; source domain; Thinking Faith.

Introduction

The global outbreak of COVID-19 has caused an unprecedented worldwide crisis. It has infected millions of people, closed borders, separated families, and changed our ways of communication. This crisis has led ordinary people to turn to media coverage to understand COVID-19 through medical explanations. Amid this uncertainty, it is not surprising to see various use of metaphors in the media attempting to explain science in everyday life. Articles on COVID-19 may serve as different functions as alarming, educating, and comforting readers.

A sizable research has investigated metaphors for diseases (Balteiro, 2017; Loftus, 2011; Sontag, 1989; Tay, 2016; Trčková, 2015; Vellek, 2016; Wallis & Nerlich, 2005). Loftus (2011) highlights that the choice of metaphors plays important roles in shaping medical practices. He explored the use of metaphors in pain management. Balteiro (2017) investigated metaphors portraying the Ebola virus. He suggested that metaphors help the world population understand the scientific explanation of the virus. Meanwhile, Trčková (2015) explored the representations of the Ebola outbreak in two major newspapers in the United States. Long (2018) examined political discourse about Ebola representation in the Canadian media. He argued that news about West African Ebola patients was waning. However, the coverage insinuates fears that it will spread from Africa to Canada. Using a discourse analysis framework, Moodley and Lesage (2020) observed reports on Ebola by various media in South Africa. In line with the previous research, Ebola in South Africa was considered a predator or criminal by using war as framing in its reporting. Studies on the representation of other plagues like malaria are also abounding. These studies invite readers to fight against that contagious disease. For example, Ferraz and Gomez (2012) examined the malaria epidemic using a comparative discourse analysis framework. Like Ferraz and Gomes, Trčková (2015) found that by using metaphors, several media claimed that EBOLA IS WAR. Next, other metaphors include EBOLA IS A LIVING PERSON and EBOLA IS A NATURAL DISASTER. Finally, Vellek (2016) argued that media coverage of the Ebola crisis was highly "politicized and event-based" (p.1).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, linguists have scrutinized the terminology employed in describing the upheaval. Singh (2020) mentions that the term "social distance" is associated with the history of apartheid and colonialism, while Rahman (2020, p. 131) concludes that the term exacerbates deeper "structural inequities". Like two sides of the same coin, metaphors can help explain medical-related issues, but they can also bring about disempowerment. The use of metaphors in communication may oppress people with disabilities when disability is construed as a medical problem vis-à-vis empowerment when disability is seen as having a cultural dimension (Coopman, 2003). In this light, investigating how religious media frame the disease is important.

This present study examines how the COVID-19 pandemic is reported in a particular media of the Jesuits in Britain, namely *Thinking Faith*. Published once a month, it is available online at www.thinkingfaith.org. Since 2008, *Thinking Faith* has published articles offering faith-based perspectives on contemporary issues and references to

Catholic Church traditions. Currently, with editors, Frances Murphy, a lay person, and Mark Aloysius, S. J., the mission is to provide writings to help readers think about their faith, and through that faith think about the world. Articles are generally sent by the Jesuits in Great Britain and lay scholars affiliated with Ignatian Spirituality-based institutions.

Why the Jesuits? Not only have the Jesuits played a crucial role in the Church history, but they have also planted the Catholic faith across the continents for centuries. They established prestigious and rigorous educational institutions and devoted themselves to advocating for the poor and the marginalized. Besides, Pope Francis, the current head of the Catholic Church, is himself a Jesuit. He is known for his Church reforms that are suited to current realities (Flamini, 2013; Maibach, 2015; Scannone, 2016) especially Catholics. Like all believers, the Catholics willingly do what the supreme religious authority recommends.

The available studies on metaphors for COVID-19 have focused on the aforementioned WAR metaphors, or metaphors on social distancing (Balteiro, 2017; Moodley and Lesage, 2020; Singh, 2020; Wicke and Bolognesi, 2020). Hence, we aim at investigating how the pandemic is framed in one particular religion-based journal, *Thinking Faith*. The idea of frame in this article refers to "detailed knowledge structures or schemas emerging from everyday experiences" (Evans and Green, 2006, p. 166). Frames of words are associated with contextually related concepts or domains. Conceptual metaphor analysis provides a robust theoretical framework to analyze the projection mappings between a conceptual source domain and a conceptual target domain. Analyzing metaphors through Jesuit perspectives will offer a new understanding of the pandemic.

Method

This study describes metaphors for COVID-19 in the Catholic online journal *Thinking Faith*. We employed a qualitative research method of aiming at "understanding a particular phenomenon from the perspective of those experiencing it" (Vaismoradi, Turunen, and Bondas, 2013, p. 398). We collected 18 articles, consisting of approximately 38,270 words, related to COVID-19 from March to July, 2020 from www.thinkingfaith.org. We read the data repeatedly and highlighted 107 metaphoric expressions through Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Gibbs, 2011; Kövecses, 2002). This theory sees metaphors not only as an ornament of language (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Šeškauskienė, 2020), but it considers metaphors as "a fundamental aspect of human thought" (Gibbs, 2011, p. 529). Through conceptual metaphors, we analyzed its linguistic and conceptual dimensions. The linguistic dimension refers to verbal metaphorical expressions tied to metaphorical concepts. Metaphorical expressions can be found in words, phrases, or clauses. Metaphorical expressions, Lakoff explains, "is the surface realization of such a cross-domain mapping" (1993, p. 203). All three researchers coded, interpreted, and validated the metaphorical expressions found in the text. The examples of metaphorical expressions were discussed and presented here **in bold**. After carefully identifying the

domains across the metaphoric expressions of COVID-19 in the data set, we found twelve main conceptual source domains that describe the current situation in *Thinking Faith.* Having interpreted the data by comparing our findings with relevant literature, we scrutinized the functions of these metaphors in explaining the COVID-19 discourse and their potential effects on the readers.

Findings and Discussion

From 18 articles related to COVID-19 published in *Thinking Faith* of March to July 2020, we identified 12 main source domains, totaling occurrences, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Source domains

No.	Source domains	Occurrence
1	War	18
2	Drama	13
3	Tools	12
4	Natural forces	12
5	Journey	10
6	Manageable item	9
7	Teacher	8
8	Other living beings	8
9	Darkness	5
10	Pain	4
11	Terror	4
12	Signs of the times	4
	Total	**107**

1. War

It is not unexpected to associate diseases with military attributes (Millear, 2015; Semino et al., 2017; Sontag, 1989; Wallis and Nerlich, 2005). For example, although Sontag (1989) criticizes the use of the war metaphor in describing AIDS and Cancer, the war-like domains still persist in describing both diseases (Camus, 2009) and AIDS (Sandahl, 2001). War metaphors are also found in describing Ebola (Wallis and Nerlich, 2005). In framing COVID-19, former American President Trump employed dysphemistic metaphoric expressions that project WAR onto COVID-19 (Olimat, 2020). The research found that war metaphors for COVID-19 are still prevalent in *Thinking Faith* articles. The conceptual metaphor, COVID-19 IS WAR, can be seen in metaphorical expressions in bold shown in Examples (1), (2), and (3).

(1)   It is both symbolic and prosaically accurate to state that Covid **attacks** the lungs. the virus crisis was now **hitting** the English-speaking world hard.

(2)   To this chilling prospect Harari opposes 'citizen empowerment', pointing out that Taiwan, Singapore and South Korea gained widespread civic consent for tracking measures to **guard** against the virus.

(3)   Yet among them the Holy Father sees 'an invisible **army**, **fighting** in the most dangerous **trenches**; an **army** whose only **weapons** are solidarity, hope, and community spirit.'

Example (1) uses the conceptual metaphor, COVID-19 IS AN ENEMY, through the use of the verb *attack*. Example (2) highlights that GOVERNMENT GUARDS AGAINST COVID-19 PANDEMIC through the use of the metaphorical phrase "guards against the virus". In Example (3), the Holy Father made use of a war metaphor, i.e. **army**. However, he intends to emphasize that SOLIDARITY, HOPE, AND COMMUNITY SPIRIT become the weapons to fight in the most dangerous trenches. Believing that the Church is on the front lines to halt humanity threats, the Pope establishes emergency funds in mission territories to fight COVID-19. Here we see that the war metaphor is to suggest the seriousness of the situation; and that Catholic Social Teaching serves as weaponry.

2. Drama

COVID-19 is likened to drama, i.e., a story or situation that usually presents a chronological series of conflicts. The plague is expressed as the tragedy type of drama in Example (4). A tragedy is defined as "a very sad event or situation, especially one involving death or suffering" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020). Examples (5) and (6) show that elements of drama are used as a metaphor for COVID-19.

(4)   There is a **tragedy** in our time that the virus has brought to the surface.

(5)   This **dramatic event** gives hope that we need not return to the kind of 'economist' thinking that places 'the market' above the social purposes in which it is necessarily embedded.

(6)   Common reporting **theme** over these last months has been an amazing side-effect of Covid-19, as the natural world has reasserted itself with unimaginable speed.

We can see that COVID-19 is framed in the source domain of drama. Besides, stirring themes are emerging surrounding the COVID-19 drama. In Example (5), we found a conceptual metaphor, COVID-19 IS DRAMA, as it is metaphorically described as a dramatic, sudden event. Nonetheless, it is comforting to realize that as a drama, COVID-19 has a beginning and an end, just like journey metaphors (Pasaribu, 2016; Selmistraitis and Boikova, 2020). As shown in Example (5), there is always hope that we can get through this crisis and the drama shall end in renewed and better economic justices.

3. Tools

This study finds mechanical metaphors which describe the virus as tools. Tools are pieces of equipment that help humans to do things. To compare, one study proves that "health professionals are also known to use the machine metaphor." (Lendik et al., 2017, p. 71). But in Examples (7), (8), and (9), the tools domains are employed not to conceptualize the professionals, but the virus.

(7) Like **a magnifying glass**, it has also revealed the weaknesses of social organisation and the vulnerability of many people.

(8) Covid-19 is amplifying and **magnifying** those same fault lines in a tragically concrete, dramatic and vivid manner.

(9) On 15 May the editorial of the *Financial Time*s noted that the virus may **trigger** the largest ever annual drop in carbon dioxide emissions.

Through the use of a direct comparison "like **a magnifying glass**", Example (7) is tied to a conceptual metaphor COVID-19 IS A TOOL. This metaphor aims to invite readers to reflect on the vulnerability of social organizations and people. Furthermore, Example (8) proves that the virus is a tool to magnify faults of injustice and environmental degradation. Through the word **trigger** in Example (9), which also has the noun form **trigger** (being a small device attached to a gun), the article portrays how the virus is seen as a tool to reduce carbon dioxide emissions.

4. Natural Forces

Moodley and Lesage (2020) express that the natural forces invasion metaphor feeds into fears. Ebola is projected as a dangerous natural phenomenon with a negative image (Balteiro, 2017). Although the COVID-19 destructive power is sometimes conveyed via natural forces metaphors, *Thinking Faith* metaphorically presents natural forces occurrences in Examples (10) and (11) as the fallouts of human injustice and environmental degradation.

(10) Rather like **climate change**, it is portrayed as a horrendous '**natural** evil'.

(11) The **storm** exposes our vulnerability and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities.

(12) It is an amoral, political and **natural** phenomenon, but also has theological meaning.

Here, *Thinking Faith* provides a different framing for climate change from "climate change is evil to climate change is a security threat" (Stibbe, 2015). Placing the words **natural evil** between quotation marks in Example (10), the conceptualization of COVID-19 as being a horrendous natural evil is disputable. *Thinking Faith* uses predicament as a

source frame. COVID-19, like climate change, is the price people pay for environmental abuses. The conceptual metaphor, COVID-19 IS STORM, in Example (11) supports the view that people's anthropocentric habits intensify the virus spread. The three examples are from an article featuring the fifth anniversary of *Laudato Si'* in which Pope Francis calls for care of the earth and stoppage of pollution, waste, and the throwaway culture (Francis, 2015). COVID-19 is framed here as a humanmade storm as a result of environmental neglects. Although natural forces' impacts on human emotions can be described through metaphors (Kövecses, 2019), the use of natural forces metaphors here are to remind readers about using positive ecological virtues to hinder COVID-19. The natural forces metaphor is a predicament. Example (12) is a natural force metaphor to appeal to readers to deepen their faith and heal the broken world. Thus, contrary to the common negative connotation of the metaphor, *Thinking Faith*'s stance is to perceive natural forces like COVID-19 as human-nature broken relationships.

5. Journey

The journey metaphor is used pervasively in various discourses such as political (Pasaribu, 2016), narrative (Vengadasamy, 2011), global (Luporini, 2013), and medical (Balteiro, 2017). COVID-19 allows another metaphor framing that involves movement, i.e. COVID-19 IS A JOURNEY. This attribution of human characteristics to inanimate nature, i.e. capable of movement, shows that COVID-19 is likened to a phase that has a beginning and an end.

(13) The coronavirus pandemic, too, **will end**. New life follows death.
(14) These signs tell us that we are now at a sort of '**crossroads**'/– /in Greek, /krisis/.
(15) In this time of the Covid-19 pandemic we see political, religious and social leaders who, regardless of their ideology, have lost empathy [...] as the pandemic **advances**.

The article predicts that, like a journey, COVID-19 will someday end as in Example (13). The word **crossroads** in Example (14) implies a road, hence part of a journey. We can also see motion through the expression "pandemic advances" in Example (15). *Thinking Faith* contributors personify the COVID-19 pandemic. The journey metaphors here indicate that COVID-19 is moving alongside the hope that the crisis will soon pass.

6. Manageable Item

The use of the management source domain is found in the pandemic coverage. Several articles use management-related metaphors when referring to some coping mechanism.

(16) Evidently, some states have **managed** the Covid crisis far better than others: the governments of South Korea and Taiwan, for example, responded much more effectively than did the UK, though with no additional notice of its dangers.

I. Linguistic Research / Lingvistikos tyrimai / Badania lingwistyczne

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(17) Suddenly, as governments **manage** Covid, we have been astonished to realise that political will can halt.

(18) Certain terms have become commonplace in the commentary on the coronavirus pandemic and how it might be **dealt with.**

Thus, the coverage attempts to give a positive view to suggest that COVID-19 is under control or manageable. The articles try to (dis)comfort the readers because some governments do manage to cope with the pandemic, as seen in Examples (16), (17), and (18). The Jesuits believe that in difficult times, we are called to live **in** social reality and to live **for** that social reality, hence making pain manageable (Traub, 2008, p. 11).

7. Teacher

The articles in *Thinking Faith* also portray COVID-19 in a positive and novel light as teachers. To our knowledge, this metaphor has not been found or investigated in most lexical studies of COVID-19 or other diseases. We can see the use of words related to **teaching and learning activities** in Examples (19), (20), and (21).

(19) The Covid-19 emergency is **testing** the physical, mental and social endurance of entire nations.

(20) We might try to **explain** the phenomenon of the plague, but, above all, should **learn** what it had to teach us … there were some things we could grasp as touching God, and others we could not'.

(21) Covid-19 is **teaching** the human race important **lessons** that it first learnt in the crucible of its early emergence in deep time.

The word **testing**, **teach**, and **lessons** are related to teaching domains. Through education metaphors, *Thinking Faith* frames COVID-19 as teachers so that readers would reflect on our experience and future actions. Indeed, the reflective practice itself is a core part of the Jesuit tradition (Loyola, 1993; Traub, 2008).

8. Other Living Beings

Although the coronavirus is certainly a living being, some lexical metaphors attribute features typical of other living entities. These metaphors describe other diseases like Ebola (Balteiro, 2017) and Cancer (Nicholas, 2013). Below are attributes of other living beings attached to COVID-19.

(22) But there is nothing explicitly evil about Covid-19. It does not 'intend' to **kill**.

(23) Indeed, the most successful parasites do not **kill** their hosts.

(24) We need to try and understand this virus as a **newcomer** in an existing panoply of **creatures** who are associated with us – some kill, yes, but many do not.

These examples show that COVID-19 are projected as other unspecified living beings through the lexical expressions, namely, **kill**, **parasite**, **newcomer**, and **creatures**. These words contribute to the description of other living beings capable of dangerous actions. The Papal Encyclical rings true here in that nature is benevolent, but human beings are often not. When humans intervene, this usually exacerbates the situation instead of solving the ecological problems (Francis, 2015, pp. 26–28). The pandemic reminds us to live in harmony with other living beings.

9. Darkness

The concept of light and dark has been used widely as metaphors (Martinek, 2019). It has been projected to express our moral values and beliefs. In sacred scriptures, light implies positive images, while darkness is the opposite of light.

(25) In times of **darkness**, through all pandemics, wars, and upheavals, we can feel absence and confusion more than presence.
(26) It was clear he saw this time of fear and sickness as a **dark** shadow.
(27) The virus is like a **darkness** that paralyses [...] as the Pope arrestingly described it in St. Peter's Square.

The use of DARKNESS metaphors in Examples (27), (28), and (29) exemplify people's inability to predict the cause and cure of the disease. The state of being in the darkness has caused confusion in Example (27), mystery in Example (28), and dangerous mysterious entity in Example (29). If ever, the use of the somber metaphor here echoes the common phrase used by Saint John of the Cross and Roman Catholics, "Dark Night of the Soul", to describe a temporary state of despair when someone is not in sync with God.

10. Pain

The media describe the effects of the pandemic through its effect, that is, pain. The world suffers emotionally and physically from COVID-19, as seen in these examples:

(28) In this time of the Covid-19 pandemic we see political, religious and social leaders who, regardless of their ideology, have lost empathy with the **pain** in front of them.
(29) The more fundamental issue to consider is our common shared humanity, to which this **pain** points us.
(30) The story narrates the profound **pain** that this little boy suffers from the plague.

The prototypical sense of pain refers to "a response to tissue damage and constitutes a crucial warning mechanism whose function is to prevent harm to our bodies" (Semino, 2010). It is usually described through metaphors, but in Examples (28) and (29), the use of the word **pain** refers to the negative feeling and emotion caused by COVID-19. Meanwhile,

Example (30) refers to an article that invites readers to revisit the existentialist's pain in Albert Camus' most famous novel *The Plague* that is often likened to COVID-19 (e.g. Salcedo 2020). *Thinking Faith* describes COVID-19 by conceptualizing **pain** as a basic human experience. As a Jesuit media, it readily subscribes to the Jesuit Pope's view that the world is sick and exhausted by the pandemic.

11. Threat

Hülsse and Spencer suggest (2008) that terrorism is constructed as a threat. We can also find the notion of threat in conceptualizing COVID-19. It poses a threat to our security and endangers us. *Thinking Faith* uses the terror-related metaphors as follows.

(31) If we have learned anything from the experience of the pandemic it is not only that we are vulnerable but that our lasting **security** does not lie in building walls of exclusion.

(32) The more fundamental **danger** remains that of ultra-authoritarian states, or reckless leaders.

(33) Some reporters have tried to find examples of good news in order to lift the prevailing **angst** and heaviness.

THREAT and COVID-19 are two different domains. The mapping within these domains into a conceptual metaphor COVID-19 IS THREAT stems from similar features they share. Both terror and the virus generate insecurity and danger in Examples (31), (32) and (33), comparable to metaphors for Ebola (Balteiro, 2017).

12. Signs of the Times

The idiomatic expression "signs of the times" has been used to name significant events for centuries. The origin of the term "signs of the times" is the Gospel of Matthew 16:3, i.e.,

"… You know how to discern the face of the sky, but you cannot discern **the signs of the times**."

Here, the term signifies that these days are decisive for repentance and judgment (Columbia University Encyclopedia, 2020). Having been used several times in a theological context, it is now used to describe the COVID-19 emergency.

(34) The Church facing the Covid-19 emergency: How do we interpret the **signs of** these extraordinary **times**?

(35) What particular meaning does the encyclical have in light of this situation, this '**sign of the times**'?

(36) Helplessness will continue to be a part of our lives, but if we are able to recognise the cry of all life in the unjust deaths of so many, we will be able to understand that our cry to God is for him to change us radically through this undesirable pandemic that is not a punishment, **but a sign of the times**.

The oft-quoted Biblical phrase in Examples (34), (35), and (36) depicts the media framing of COVID-19 as a wake-up call for discernment. Used by *Thinking Faith* to describe this time of crisis, such religious context invites readers to make meaning of and reflect on the pandemic, hence thinking about life and faith.

As a closing thought, the use of metaphor by *Thinking Faith* contributes toward invoking positive thoughts. Unlike the frequently used dysphemistic metaphors of diseases (Camus, 2009; Olimat, 2020; Sandahl, 2001; Wallis and Nerlich, 2005), *Thinking Faith* uses metaphorical expressions to frame positive views amid the pandemic fear. People need to remain hopeful. There is no doubt that the Jesuits excel in eloquence. For example, when they send the message of hope amid fear, Gannett and Brereton (2016) argue that having made use of rhetorical tools and the ancient art of persuasion from the sixteenth century up until today, the Jesuits have done extremely well in mastering the modern art of communication. Thus, using such proficiency in communication, the coverage of *Thinking Faith* attempts to instill hope instead of fear of COVID-19 by using more encouraging metaphors than the dispiriting ones.

Conclusion

Susan Sontag, in her seminal *Illness as Metaphors*, warned us not to overuse language of victimization to describe an illness as it may terribly disempower its sufferers (Sontag, 1978). While the conceptual metaphor of DISEASE IS MALIGN continues to persist, news coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic by *Thinking Faith*, the British Jesuits' online journal, has undercut the negative metaphors with the positive ones. The positive metaphors are meant to inspire the readers to take action and change their beliefs about COVID-19. Instead of being viewed as malignant, it should be a positive opportunity to reflect on their faith's journey by showing empathy and solidarity.

This article has discussed conceptual domains of COVID-19 metaphors. They are predominantly framed with reflective and empowering meaning. The coverage of *Thinking Faith* aims at showing the life-changing wisdom of the Gospel and Catholic Social Teaching as well as Papal messages. The positive use of metaphorical expressions tied to these domains, **teacher**, **drama**, **journey**, **manageable item**, and **natural forces,** helps impart hope (while being alert) to the readers. Indeed, violence-related metaphors like **war**, **pain**, and **threat** for COVID-19 can sometimes be more detrimental than helpful. This study shows that the Jesuit media's use of metaphors is contextualized. When **pain** and **darkness** are used as metaphors, the frame is asking readers to bear the difficult time as part of their contemplation and action. Dealing with catastrophe is tough, but we are called to become more compassionate to the more suffered and marginalized in this now sick world. In this current situation, we need more words of encouragement. To come out of the woods better is the Jesuit view as opposed to the seemingly pessimistic, bleak, and frightening perceptions of the pandemic situation often played out in other media.

Acknowledgments

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