

COVID Reflection #2

COVID as a Lenten experience of conversion

~ a concept from Pope Francis

Lent is a time of conversion, and for many of us we already feel that we have lived a Lent for more than a year. The deprivations of a normal Lent have been ours for more than a year. These deprivations, as we expressed last week, were in particular the lack of interpersonal contact, the lack of opportunities in the family and with friends, and as some have expressed - the lack of a favorable environment for the development and happiness of their children.

If we want to see this as a time of conversion, as Pope Francis has indicated to us, how can we relate this to the three traditional ways of Lent - fasting for the good of the body, prayer for the good of the soul, and charity for the good of the neighbor?

I don't know about your case regarding fasting, but this Lent I have begun in earnest a fast because during this past year I have gained weight from lack of bodily activity, and from satisfying myself with the foods that give me happiness under stress and boredom.

But, in the field of prayer, I have to say that I have increased my time in prayer, especially encouraged and inspired by the spiritual reading that I am doing in an almost extreme way during this time.

Perhaps, as I shared last week, perhaps the Lenten area in which I have given the most energy and attention was toward charity. As we shared last week, I believe we have all grown in our sensitivity, compassion and solidarity with others. This has been a fruit of this shared suffering, all of us looking for support wherever we can. For us we are also animated by faith, reflecting this attitude of the Good Samaritan.

As Pope Francis has expressed we have two paths to choose from - to be depressed and alienated, or to be creative. Our faith, and our experience of Jesus, encourages us to choose creativity. Perhaps we can identify and share how this creativity has been expressed during this time of conversion. For me, it would be my thoughtfulness to reach out - especially through the internet - to so many people, especially those who live alone and isolated. A few words of support and concern go a long way for them, because it comes out of a sincere friendship and a relationship with a history of sharing and supporting each other in good times and bad. For example, in these last few weeks I am writing messages of concern and prayer to members of the Congregation who are in quarantine or in hospital. In Poland, in particular, the numbers continue to grow. I have also spoken on the phone with Sister Alfie and Sister Marty, who send their greetings.

The other day the First Reading at Mass was from St. Paul at Romans 8:31-39:

"What to say after this? If God is with us, who will be against us? God, who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not with him grant us all things? Who will accuse God's elect, if it was he who made them righteous? Who will condemn them? Will it be Christ Jesus, the one who died and even the one who rose again and is at the right hand of God pleading for us? Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will trials or distress, persecution or famine, lack of clothing, dangers or the sword? As the Scripture says: Because of your cause, we are continually being dragged to death; we are treated like sheep destined for slaughter. But no, in all this we will triumph thanks to him who loved us. I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor spiritual powers, nor the present, nor the future, nor the forces of the universe, be they of the heavens or of the abysses, nor any creature whatsoever, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which we find in Christ Jesus our Lord".

These words of St. Paul, a man deeply converted to the Lord, remind us of the source of our creativity, and the tonic against depression and alienation - our personal relationship with the Lord. This is the heart of our faith, more than participation in the Sacraments and the life of the Church, for no quarantine can separate us from Christ. They can close the doors of the temples, or limit the numbers in the congregation, or diminish our communal participation to something online, but the intimate and personal relationship will not be jeopardized or interrupted if we believe in these words of St. Paul. We need to not only stay 'the same', but increase our prayer, in this spiritual Lenten season. We all realize that we need more flame in our fire.

I also share with you some words of Fratelli Tutti, from Pope Francis:

Article 32: Truly, a world tragedy like the covid19 has revived for the moment the sense that we are a global community, all in the same boat, where the problems of one are the problems of all. Once again, we have realized that no one is saved alone; we can only be saved together.

Article 33: Today we can recognize that "we have fed on dreams of splendor and grandeur, and in the end we have consumed distraction, insularity and solitude. We have satiated ourselves with networking, and lost the taste of fraternity. We seek quick and easy results, only to find ourselves overwhelmed with impatience and anxiety. As prisoners of a virtual reality, we have lost the taste and flavor of what is truly real." The pain, uncertainty and fear, and the realization of our own limitations, brought on by the pandemic have only made it more urgent that we rethink our lifestyles, our relationships, the organization of our societies and, above all, the meaning of our existence."

If this experience is, in a way, a call to conversion, the Pope has helped us to see some attitudes and dreams that have no place in this new reality. Our conversion is not like St. Paul's - from one moment to the next - but is sometimes a slow walk with the Lord, discovering day by day what it means to be a disciple, what it means to be a steward. Depression and alienation deny a faith response to this harsh reality. Creativity expresses the new life and hope of a faith response to the same harsh reality.

In a letter from Pope Francis he has mentioned some biblical characters in relation to crisis - the Good Samaritan, Noah, Lazarus, King David, Solomon and Samson. What we know about each of these speaks to us of a form of new life. It makes me think of the person of Noah in the book of Genesis. Perhaps we feel adrift like Noah and his family and their menagerie of animals. Like Noah we look for signs of hope, of a future. The green olive branch was this proof for him of a 'green' future, a reason to hope. Perhaps an initiative like this is a green branch for each of us. So, we don't have to look for the green branch, but become a green branch for others, others who are looking for a reason to smile, a reason to think that things will get better, and that 'normal' life will return. One of my favorite lines from St. Teresa of Avila is "From the saints who do not smile, deliver us Lord" How can we proclaim our faith and share the Good News with long faces? How can we inspire faith and trust in God with others with tragic faces? This green olive branch not only means peace for many in the world, now, more than ever, it has to mean the hope of a better tomorrow, and a better world by our conversion during the crisis.

~ Fr. Paul Voisin, CR

(Superior General, Congregation of the Resurrection)