

COVID Reflection #4

“Together with the vaccines, fraternity and hope are, in truth, the medicine we need in the world today”

~ Pope Francis

In this last of reflections on words of Pope Francis, in relation to the global pandemic, we look at the following quotation in which he spoke of a crisis of *“human relations”*. He said that this is *“an expression of a general anthropological crisis, in relation to the concept of the human person and their transcendent dignity.”* He goes on to say that *“Together with the vaccines, fraternity and hope are, in truth, the medicine we need in the world today”*.

Once again we have the richness of the Pope’s teachings to help us develop this reflection. In the Apostolic Exhortation of 2016, Amoris Laetitia. On Love in the Family., Pope Francis said, in Article 32, that *“It is evident that “the principal tendencies of anthropological cultural changes” are leading “individuals, in personal and family life, to receive less and less support from social structure than in the past”*. Indeed, the changes in our society – especially since our youth – have produced a society in which so many other organization structures – schools, Church, government, etc. – have sometimes forgot this guiding principle, and put in danger the understanding and quality of the basic unit of society – the family. In a world in which power, pleasure, possessions, self-sufficiency, pride, and blind ambition are highly valued, and sought after, the values and virtues of the gospel of Jesus Christ find themselves at the bottom of the list of dreams and goals to strive for. These values and virtues are seen by our society as weaknesses, like humility, generosity, compassion, solidarity, forgiveness, self-sacrifice, and faith itself. It appears at times that we live in a ‘dog eat dog’ world, in which one only takes care of oneself, and everyone else must fend for themselves. Such individualism is reflected in all facets of our society, unfortunately, and take us away from inter-dependence, the common good, and the idea of building a community.

In Article 138, Pope Francis leads us in a reflection on an important part in human relations – the art of listening. If sometimes appears that this is a dying art, as communication is so negatively influenced by our digital communication. We look for short cuts, and too often responses are transmitted even without much thought, but rather on impulse, and often impulses that may later be regretted. Part of this *“dignity of the person”* is our patient listening, which the Holy Father says demands *“self-discipline”* and an *“interior silence”*. These words may leave some people scratching their heads, not valuing how much they produce more positive and thoughtful communication. Our words are powerful, and we need to choose them well. I found, for instance, in my Canonical Visitation of the Resurrectionists in thirteen countries, the positive response I had during my personal interview with each Resurrectionist, and the positive comments I received after my Visitation about how much it meant to so many to be listened to, and my inquiry about (1) how they came to be a Resurrectionist, (2) their physical health, (3) their spiritual life, (4) their life in Community, (5) their apostolate, and finally (6) how they are living and sharing our charism of hope. I was moved by so many things that our men shared with me,

how open and honest they were, and how much they appreciated being asked. Quite a few said to me, “I can’t remember any other Superior General asking me this”, which I took as a great compliment. We have to be willing to ‘waste’ time with one another, listening with both ears, with our mind focused on them, our heart open to hear what their heart has to say, and our soul open to receive a revelation of God through them. Only such listening can produce a true encounter resulting in a true dialogue. In such a quality of communication we come to recognize, and celebrate that *“transcendent dignity”* of the other.

In Fratelli Tutti, in Article 213, Pope Francis speaks more of this dignity, telling us it is *“not ... something we have invented or imagined, but because human beings possess an intrinsic worth superior to that of material objects and contingent situations”*. This *“unalienable dignity”* comes from God, not from how much one has in the bank, or what size of house one lives in, or the title in their work. For me, being created *“in the image of God”* (Genesis 1:27) means that we are capable of communicating with God and sharing in His life. It means that I am holy as God is holy, and my life is to reflect that nature of God. In the General Audience of August 26, 1998, Saint John Paul II said, *“This eternal truth about man revealed to us by Jesus Christ has a particular timeliness in our day. Even amid sharp contradictions, the world today is experiencing a season of intense “socialization” both with regard to interpersonal relationships within various human communities, and with regard to relations among peoples, races, different societies and cultures”*. Unsure of what “socialization” is, I found an article by Dr. Nicki Lisa Cole, published January 30, 2020, Understanding Socialization in Sociology, in which she wrote, *“Socialization is a process that introduces people to social norms and customs. This process helps individuals function well in society, and, in turn, helps society run smoothly. Family members, teachers, religious leaders, and peers all play roles in a person’s socialization. This process typically occurs in two stages: Primary socialization takes place from birth through adolescence, and secondary socialization continues throughout one’s life. Adult socialization may occur whenever people find themselves in new circumstances, especially those in which they interact with individuals whose norms or customs differ from theirs. During socialization, a person learns to become a member of a group, community, or society. This process not only accustoms people to social groups but also results in such groups sustaining themselves”*. I recognize that part of the “socialization” of each of us – whether in our adolescence or adulthood – was our participation in the life and activities of Emmaus. Our socialization in the 50’s and 60’s by Joaco and I, and of yours in the 70’s and 80’s, were not that substantially different. Whereas today, healthy “socialization” may be at greater risk, because of the many changes in our world, and not all of them positive, and surely not all of them evangelical. Perhaps covid19 has been a wake-up call for many in the world to realize that some of our present “socialization” is not preparing us for ‘real’ life, as the stresses and frustrations of this hard reality we have been living for the last year has opened us up to how, in some areas of our lives, we may have been going after things that are really not that important, and creating ‘needs’ that are not valid. For many, it has been an opportunity to see some of these realities in a faith perspective, trying to find hope, and to try to see these realities of life as God sees them. One important discovery we have made is that we are part of a community, that ‘we are in this boat together’. We have experienced how much we need one another, and have come out of our self-sufficient shells to reach out and serve, and to be reached out to and served. In Article 30 of Fratelli Tutti, Pope

Francis says, *“In today’s world, the sense of belonging to a single human family is fading, and the dream of working together for justice and peace seems an outdated utopia. What reigns instead is a cool, comfortable and globalized indifference, born of a deep disillusionment concealed behind a deceptive illusion: thinking that we are all-powerful, while failing to realize that we are all in the same boat. ... Isolation and withdrawal into one’s own interests are never the way to restore hope and bring about renewal”*. We have talked about how this renewal is happening on an individual level, on a family level, I am sure on the level of the Church, and in society in general. We are changing, being transformed, and hopefully this brings us to a better world, a new world that is – in reality – the fruit of suffering, fear, uncertainty, frustration and loss. Once again, we remember how Pope Francis told us that we have a choice between *“creativity”* and *“depression and alienation”*. With Jesus we choose creativity!

“Fraternity and hope” are the medicine that we need for our mind, heart and spirit, to help us re-create this world through what we have experienced and learned. I like to think of ‘hope’ as our belief and our experience that God can do the impossible and the improbable, as He did when Jesus rose from the dead. Just as Jesus died and rose, we have all experienced in our lives our own resurrections, that came after we ‘died’ to something – an attitude or an activity, a possession, or even a person in our life. This ‘letting go’ freed us up to embrace something or someone new, which brought us into closer union with God and into greater harmony with one another.

~ Fr. Paul Voisin, CR

(Superior General, Congregation of the Resurrection)