

Transforming Calamity into Unity, Dignity and Healing
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Discernment and Transformation in Post Pandemic Period
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“Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?” (Romans 8:35)

No one and nothing will. Not even COVID-19. Of that we should be certain. The love of God will not change as it is constant and abiding. However, we may change our way of understanding it, receiving it and participating in it. This occurs especially in times of major global events, such as wars, natural disasters, widespread illnesses and pandemic, since human reaction causes a change in behavior and perception of things including spiritual, i.e. understanding of God’s grace and His word to us, role of the Church, participation in Sacraments, and observance of pious practices.

This presentation is a very modest attempt to analyze in six points how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected our lives, life of the Church and what consequences and impact may be on our spiritual life in the after-virus world.

1. “The Pandemic is as much of a behavioral crisis as a medical one”

No doubt that the COVID-19 virus is a global and still on-going event of the early 21st century. We follow the sad statistics of people around the world were infected and how many died each day. We rejoice on numbers of people who survived and got better. We read regular updates on the developmental progress of vaccines and cannot wait to hear – IT IS HERE! Meanwhile, we are forced to wait and take all precautions to protect ourselves and not get sick.

Presently, we find ourselves in a constant struggle how to deal with the virus medically and bring it under control, and develop a way to react and behave in the ongoing pandemic. There are countless testimonies and eyewitness reports of how what was known as normal life before, has changed during the pandemic and it seems to become a new normal regardless of whether or not a person was infected or not. And a process of adoption to the new normal is very painful, lengthy, and may be full of fear, which affects human conduct in a direct way.

A psychologist observed, “the pandemic is as much of a behavioral crisis as a medical one.” It supports a notion that extreme social stress can bring out the better or worse in people. Abraham Lincoln put it well during his civil war era inaugural address, - “angels of our nature”. The better angels or “characteristics” of our nature come out when tend to turn to others for connection, support, and solidarity, even among strangers. For instance, it is wonderful to hear of stories about remarkable acts of kindness, compassion, and graciousness towards others.

Young people help older folks, or people share their surplus with neighbors and needy. The darker angels or characteristics come through in more selfish and hoarding behaviors in a crisis. Many of us were first witnesses of people stocking up food, household cleaning supplies and even toilet paper. When people experience fear, they can have the tendency to get selfish and act primitively. There appear signs of herd mentality – I am doing what everyone else is doing.

Clearly, while maintenance of sound mental health in the time of crisis is essential, new patterns of behavior may develop in response to environment of the pandemic, in which we find ourselves in, and basic instinct of survival.

2. Five major human implications to expect from people's behavior from now on, which may change our sense of perception and experience.

1. Change in confidence. A lesson we quickly learned from new experiences is that other people and places may carry an invisible threat, i.e. to get infected with the virus. Our process of making significant or small decisions hinges on perceived or assessed danger. We do not tolerate risk and familiar people and places become more valuable to us. With deterioration of confidence, trust will become more important than before. It is built in relation to people, institutions and services with proven facts of effectiveness and reliability. There will be a certain pressure to reevaluate and rank anew priorities and values of life, which includes faith in God and role of the Church.
2. Welcome to Virtual World! We have experienced a shift in mode we work, study, learn, interact, pray, even shop from in-person to doing it virtually with the help of computers, phones, etc. What was introduced as a temporary solution, is, in fact, becoming a new pattern of operation and life. Adoption of digital by those yet to do so will be accelerated and going virtual will be required. It is very possible that anything that can be virtually will, in fact, be. For instance, we see that “attendance” of live streamed Divine Liturgies has become a norm among some faithful, gained in popularity and demand. Keep in mind that Church cannot become and be virtual if we want to experience the love of Christ in its fullness.
3. Focus on health. At the present time we are realizing that existing medicine and health institutions are not able to provide necessary means of remedy, cure and care. However, people will be interested in receiving as much help from health providers as possible. In addition, almost every business will be mindful of health of their customers and employees.
4. Cocooning. Our homes became centers of life and activity during shutdowns and restrictions in the pandemic. Members of families were placed into conditions where they had to rediscover anew about nature and mode of operation of the family. Home renovation projects, home schooling, games, etc., have become popular activities. The opportunity to be together and do things as a family has come with a hefty economic

price (loss of jobs, less working hours, smaller paychecks). There will be a rise in home spending – on the home and made at home as people will stay more local. Also, people start focusing on opportunities and strategies to stay home with families and ways to make living.

5. Authority. Any imposed shutdowns, lockdowns, guidelines and restrictions by (civil, church) authority work to curb the pandemic if reasons are clearly explained and people accept and follow. Otherwise, weight of the authorities will fall inadvertently. There will be a constant reevaluation of work by the authorities in how it ensures public health and common good.

3. Projected effects of the pandemic

No doubt, fear and health concerns will have a lasting effect on human behavior. The Church has a task to identify and prepare for any and all possible outcomes of new human condition and reaction to the love of God as is experienced in the Church, celebration of Divine Liturgy and Sacraments. What kind of impact does the pandemic have on the Church as an institution? What effects will experience the Church as a community of believers? Will the pandemic change what the Church is now?

To answer the latter question, Josh Laxton, a writer for Christianity Today, states the following,

First, there are those who think this [pandemic] will change church as we know it. Honestly, I do not buy what they are selling. At some point – sooner for some than others – our Sunday morning routines will be back to normal.

Second, there are those that believe that this crisis has ended the “consumer” model of church. Truthfully, people have been “consuming” more and more content, i.e. feeding people via a digital platform.

Third, there are those who believe this crisis will put an end to the megachurch. The Spanish flu of 1918 didn’t drive believers into smaller groups or house gatherings.”

Short term effects (2-15 months)

1. Interruption to our normal way of doing things: guidelines to secure public health in our churches
2. Caring for seniors and the vulnerable (visits, attending to spiritual and physical needs);
3. Church attendance will vary: depending on general situation, individual’s health. Reach out and constant contact is essential.
4. People will be shocked and tired: physical, mental and emotional tiredness.

5. Finances will be tight. People's income is limited. Many building and renovation projects will be put on hold. It will affect parish fundraising events. For instance, half of parish income comes from fundraising. Generosity and stewardship become key.
6. Trips, children camps and pilgrimages are on hold.

Long term effects (16 months and on):

1. Churches will change ways they manage finances: reduced incomes, changed priorities in ministries.
2. New ways of ministering: livestreaming will be a new tool; creation of online religious education classes, Bible study classes, etc.
3. Be more attentive to the need of local community: food pantries, assistance to the needy.
4. Be a continued witness of the love of God in the world divided by politics, faith, race, social justice issues, human rights, freedom of religion.
5. Embracing the love of God: people will be rediscovering the value of faith, faith in God, witness and good of the Church.

4. Crisis is a problem and opportunity

While determining and calculating effects of the pandemic is necessary, it is an opportune moment that may be taken for general good of the Church and greater witness of the love of God.

Father Augusto Zampini, adjunct Secretary of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development and member of the Vatican's COVID-19 commission, recently stated in the interview, "The COVID-19 emergency is pushing the world to a different scenario. Because the Church is in the world, we are not foreign to this challenge. The Church needs to respond to this crisis in a radical way because it is a radical crisis." The commission is working on long-term solutions, which should be simple in their essence, no matter how complex our current reality may be. He says, "The Church that is always trying to respond to reality following the Tradition of the Church: How are we going to respond to this tiny virus that is making all the major viruses we have all the more visible?" These "major viruses" are environment, existing poverty, inequality, etc.

The Holy Father wishes to use the present moment and situation to refine the mission of the Church, which would emphasize its missionary nature and work in the environment of various challenges and circumstances. The main emphasis is on change in culture and mindset, not just do a personnel or structural reorganizations. It is a process. "The Pope lives a constant dynamic of discernment, which opens him to the future. It opens him also to the future of the reform of the Church."

The Holy Father and commission are actively involved and working with parishes and clergy to understand the impact of the pandemic on celebration of the sacraments. Is a Liturgy celebrated virtually real? How does the Church build a community in a world that talks about social distancing and shutdowns? Church community (i.e. parish) and communion within community are very important aspects that need to be fostered in the Church at times of the pandemic and looking into the future.

5. What Should We do During the Epidemic? – Transform!

In his book “Leading Edge”, Dr. Robert Dale says that a crisis can teach us some strong lessons in life. As he writes, “the lessons of crisis are powerful, especially when crisis is seen as ‘intensified opportunity’ to learn some of life’s deepest secrets.” We can think of lives of St. Teresa of Calcutta and her “dark nights of the soul”. Or, St. Apostle Paul, who spend 3 years in the desert alone and some time with the Apostles discerning the will of God for him before he went on to evangelize the world.

1. So what can we do in time of the pandemic? Transform – improve our spiritual life!

The pandemic is a great time to have a spiritual renewal. We need an update and upgrade of our faith and spiritual life that will not be consisting of reading and memorizing the Bible and writings of the Saints, but absorb all that we read in such a way that it becomes a part of who are – reflections of Christ, His love for us. “No longer live I, but Christ in me”

This transformation is not possible without sincere prayer, practices of prayer, receiving the Sacraments, especially Holy Communion and Confession.

Transformation is change. The way we live our faith changes us and others around us? How do we live out our faith? What foundation is it on (example of a wise builder in Matthew 7:24)

Simply having information about the Bible and Church, is not enough to change. It has to be practiced.

2. Let’s create social networks in our parishes!

Social – involvement of others to a strong companionship.

Network – exchange of information or services among parishioners, which helps to nurture healthy and close relationships.

Example: Jesus and his Apostles

3. Core Values are clarified.

Importance of virtue in our spiritual life and holiness of life: faith, hope, love, perseverance, modesty, wisdom, tolerance, faithfulness, friendships, etc.

They are not supposed to be punch lines, but our own principles and habits in life.

4. Well defined sense of direction.

“Lord, where will we go? You have the words of eternal life”.

6. The Love of God always prevails!

Someone said that the Catholic Church is an expert that knows how to survive disasters including pandemics.

Gospel: After Jesus’ death on the cross, the curtain was torn in two, earthquake, splitting rocks, graves opened. The disciples knew it was not a coincidence. They knew that He is the Son of God. What did they do at the end of the day? They buried the dead, went home, and observed the tradition. And on Sunday morning, their world changed again with the resurrection of Christ. In the next 40 days, they had a new routine – seeing Jesus, having a meal with Him, listening to His teaching... And it changed again with His ascension into heaven. It changed again when the Holy Spirit descended upon them, and they started preaching the Gospel to all the nations.

They lived through constant changes, witnessed and experienced natural disasters, etc. Nothing seems to distract them or get off the course – to preach the Gospel of Christ, His love to us! Likewise, we need to keep our heads high to heaven, where our help comes from, and our eyes and heart open for the Lord.

Thank you very much!