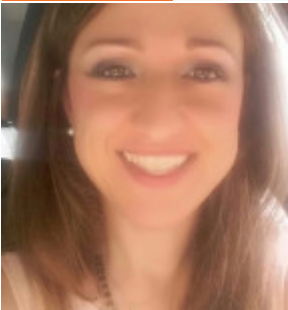


CORONAVIRUS

Being prepared for death... is what we need

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As the discussion continues about whether it is right or not to exclude the Catholic faithful from participating in the Eucharistic Sacrifice, some religious, priests, and bishops are preparing to keep the faithful company by means of social media; others are shooting videos asking what chastisement really means (Does God punish or not?) or discussing fear and offering various theological reflections. Some are saying that we

still have Communion today, just in another form (and we hope that even if they keep repeating it, we will not become accustomed to thinking that receiving Communion is just the same as not receiving it or that the Mass on TV is really not all that different from actually going to Mass). Everyone is sending out his own personal message and inviting people to stay at home out of prudence because the Church is rightly concerned for everyone's physical health. In the midst of all this, a question spontaneously arises: But isn't the Church supposed to take care of the health of our souls most of all?

Everyone is shut in at home, and the risk is that, since we are dependent on technology more than ever and have learned to replace real human contact with technology (and it will not be easy now to go back), we are spending these days going back and forth between two attitudes: terror due to the media bombardment about how many people are dying from Covid-19 and escaping thoughts about death by watching videos and social media messages of every sort (texting, Facebook, Whatsapp) that are trying to make us believe that "it will all be fine." But actually, if we think about the dramatic reality we are all presently immersed in, neither of these two attitudes is adequate. Neither one really helps us deal with this crisis. The Church, which has been neither pessimistic – "Either lock yourself up in your house or you will all die" – nor optimistic – "If you stay at home you won't die" – is called to be, more than ever, completely realistic about her mission: to help everyone look squarely at the fact of death and prepare themselves for it.

Realism is actually a great help. For example, if we think of those who have died in recent days, and how in some hospitals they do not even have bodybags for the corpses (it's not like this everywhere of course), what makes us more afraid is not death itself but the fact that many people are dying without the comfort of their loved ones with them and above all without the Sacraments or funerals (it is said that there is not enough protective equipment to allow priests to enter into intensive care units). And so one wonders how the Church can deal with this situation from the point of view of caring for these souls (since caring for public health is the competence of the state). Perhaps the Church can help doctors and nurses to understand what sort of spiritual support they can give to the sick or remind those who are afraid of death what Jesus said to Martha: "Whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and the one who lives and believes in me will never die." Thus, in addition to trying to postpone death by means of medical care, Christians ought to above all be concerned – for themselves or for their loved ones – with helping people to be ready for that moment that frightens us but that eventually comes to everyone.

It is being said, even among believers, that anyone who is asking that the celebration of Mass be reinstated, anyone who is going to church to pray or to adore the Blessed Sacrament, anyone perhaps looking for a priest to ask for confession and the Eucharist (following necessary precautions like keeping a safe distance or wearing a mask), is a selfish person. It is now said that Christian charity means staying at home in order to keep our loved ones safe (even if the churches are open and the state has only forbidden gatherings). And yet, thinking precisely of the people most at risk, for them and for us the thing we most need to fear at this moment is not death (which can strike them at any moment even apart from the coronavirus and which sooner or later will strike us all) but rather departing from this world in fear and terror.

And so, on the one hand we can try to protect the weakest people, avoiding too many visits, advising them to take a walk by themselves (since that is good for their mood and thus for their immune system), to visit church alone, to get a mask, to wash their hands, etc., and tell them to keep on living in such a way as to reduce the risk of death (even though we can't reduce the risk to zero because to live means to journey towards death). But on the other hand, how can we not desire that someone will be with them to prepare them for death? How can we not hope that they will be able to find a priest who can hear their confession, perhaps sitting in the pews in the now-abandoned churches (we repeat, so as not to be misunderstood, always keeping a one-meter distance)? A priest who will show them the face of the Father, who will invite them to forgive others for the wrongs they have suffered, to reconcile themselves with God and their neighbor, and who will give them Holy Communion. Also because the very restrictive measures the government has imposed are only increasing fear, suspicion, and tensions between people (it is emblematic that at the same time people are talking about altruism in caring for the elderly there are cases of people denouncing others to the authorities because they stopped to chat).

We need to be reminded more than ever about the Sacraments, the Last Things, and the meaning of suffering. Of the Mercy of God, repentance from sin, and how the saints died. As never before, death must not be a taboo subject for the Church. This is what we need to hear being talked about, as well as our hope of eternal life.

What comes to mind in this regard is what the Servant of God Chiara Corbella, a doctor, said before she died:

"In that Mass celebrated at one in the morning...we were just at Holy Communion...And just then I heard her [Chiara] say: "Ahhh...But I might vomit!" I, who was more distressed than anyone by this vomit, I understood. But then the true Doctor arrived: Chiara

received Holy Communion...Chiara had only one Doctor, it was Our Lord. She wanted only this Doctor. "Ahhh...Now I can throw up, I can also cough, I can even die. I don't care."

Chiara died reminding everyone that we will all come to the same end. And she did so because, thanks to the constant company of a friar who never lied to her about the fact that her death was approaching, she wanted to tell us that it is possible to go to heaven this way, at peace in the journey home to God.

Isn't this what we all really want in our deepest heart, more than escaping death? If all those who have died from the coronavirus had been prepared to die in this way, wouldn't we all be less afraid of the number of deaths in these days? And perhaps we would even be ready to risk a little more, instead of trying to delude ourselves that by stopping living we will be able to escape death. Wouldn't this be the true victory over the coronavirus? Today more than ever before, at such a grave hour when people are more disposed than ever to listen, isn't this the only message that the Church can offer that will truly resonate in the depths of men's hearts?