

CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

Coronavirus: The Doctor Takes Care of It, But God Alone Heals

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The present concern over a possible coronavirus epidemic raises the question once again: what is the Christian response to things of this nature? There is a very beautiful, profound and practical passage of the Old Testament that applies to this situation,

found in the book of Ecclesiasticus:

"Treat the doctor with the honour that is his due, in consideration of his services; for he too has been created by the Lord.

*Healing itself comes from the Most High,
like a gift received from a king (...)*

*The Lord has brought forth medicinal herbs from the ground,
and no one sensible will despise them (...)*

*He has also given some people knowledge,
so that they may draw credit from his mighty works.*

*He uses these for healing and relieving pain;
the druggist makes up a mixture from them.*

*Thus, there is no end to his activities; thanks to him,
well-being exists throughout the world.*

*My child, when you are ill, do not rebel,
but pray to the Lord and he will heal you.*

*Renounce your faults, keep your hands unsoiled,
and cleanse your heart from all sin.*

*Offer incense and a memorial of fine flour,
make as rich an offering as you can afford.*

*Then let the doctor take over -- the Lord created him too --
do not let him leave you, for you need him.*

There are times when good health depends on doctors.

*For they, in their turn, will pray the Lord to grant them the grace to relieve and to heal, and
so prolong your life.*

*Whoever sins in the eyes of his Maker,
let such a one come under the care of the doctor!"*

(Ecc 38,1-2.4.6-15)

Technically, the conclusion might sound problematic, but the Jerusalem Bible notes that the literal translation of the Hebrew in the last verse would be more coherently rendered as "It is a sin before the Creator to base one's strength on a doctor." Furthermore, the esteem that Christians have for doctors and medicine is in no way diminished by the numerous miracles of healing that Jesus Christ performed, since the Apostle Paul writes at the end of his Letter to the Colossians: "Luke the beloved physician sends greetings, as does Demas" (Col 4:14).

Now that we have overcome the technical hurdles in the text, we see that the

deeper message of the passage from Ecclesiasticus speaks of a “symphony” of two concretely inseparable things. On the one hand a doctor is a gift of God, just like medicine and the intelligence God has given to certain people to create medicine from the things that God himself has created, and thus the passage teaches us that the importance of doctors cannot be dismissed. On the other hand, healing comes from the Most High God, and so prayer is necessary – above all prayer by the doctor and also prayer by those who are sick – and not only prayer but also purification from sin. And so we may interpret the Scriptures using a sense of “Catholic balance,” which neither opposes nor separates nature and grace but holds them together harmoniously.

For this reason, in offering an analysis of the coronavirus, *The Daily Compass* has first and foremost asked a doctor – Paolo Gulisano – for his evaluation. Yet, it is still necessary to say a few words about the secondary and complementary Christian reaction of prayer in such a situation, which in this case is upheld for two reasons. The first reason is the necessity of praying always when faced with illness or a potential epidemic, and the second is more circumstantial, that is, how we ought to respond in the face of the anguish that media coverage of an outbreak tends to generate. A Christian cannot simply have fear “like those others who have no hope” (1 Thess 4:13), but should calm these fears with prayer.

Having said that, the follow-up question is, “Yes, but how should we pray?” If we remain at the level of personal prayer or prayer in a small group, it’s quite easy to answer; there are many forms of prayers to be said, such as the Rosary, Eucharistic adoration, various short aspirations, etc.

If instead we consider liturgical prayer, including the sacraments and sacramental – apart from the difficulty of convincing the clergy who administer the sacraments from entering into this perspective – there are still some possibilities, even though not as many. The Roman Missal contains formularies for Mass “*In Different Circumstances*” to be used when events happen either in the course of human life or simply the course of nature: for example, “*In time of earthquake/To ask for rain/To ask for favourable weather/Against storms.*” There are fewer options in the situation of a possible epidemic, when we must be content to use the formulary “*For the Sick*” or the more generic formula “*In Any Need.*”

The *Collection of Marian Masses* does better with Mass option number 44, “*The Blessed Virgin Mary, Health of the Sick,*” in which the prayer asks “to rejoice always in health of mind and body” and also asks God, through Mary’s intercession, to “save us from the evils which now sadden us and guide us to the joy that will never end.”

The *Benedictional* or *Book of Blessings* (Italian edition), in addition to a blessing for the sick (pp. 117-126, nn. 226-251 and the subsequent texts for particular circumstances) has a “Blessing for the protection of health on a memorial of the Blessed Virgin Mary or of a saint” (pp. 795-801, nn. 1923-1940).

All this however still remains inside a church or a chapel. But what if we want to pray outside? What is the best way to do this, if not with a procession? It should be recalled that in ancient times and above all in the medieval and baroque periods, penitential processions were frequently and fruitfully held, asking for deliverance from epidemics of the plague and other diseases, so much so that the devotion associated with many particular shrines or statues/icons of the Blessed Mother originated in thanksgiving for being liberated from an epidemic.

Today there are processions within the liturgy, for example the procession with candles on February 2, the procession on Holy Thursday for the reposition of the Blessed Sacrament, the solemn procession with the Paschal Candle during the Easter Vigil, etc., but public processions are generally limited to the patronal feast day of a certain place (whether a Marian feast or the feast day of a certain saint) and the Solemnity of Corpus Christi. Neither canon 944, nor chapter XXI of the

***Caeremoniale Episcoporum*, nor numbers 245-247** of the *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy*, which speak generally about processions, provide explicit direction for a penitential procession asking God for deliverance from an epidemic. And of course, common sense seems to offer numerous objections to having a procession: in a society that is ever more urbanised, processions create traffic problems and thus there is no need to increase them; in the present cultural context such processions no longer express what everyone believes but only the faith of a few, a few who are very careful not to place their lantern where it can be seen but instead place it ever more fully under a bushel basket. And of course, there is an advantage to doing so, as Cardinal Biffi observed: “This way you don’t even notice any difference when the lamp goes out” (*Il quinto evangelio* 10).

And yet, a public procession to implore the end of an epidemic from God – I am

not talking now about the coronavirus but about a real and truly devastating epidemic – would offer a beautiful and visible sign of hope for salvation to everyone, even to those who did not directly take part in it.

But in order to find something of this nature in the liturgical books, we have to go all the way back “before the Council,” that is, to the last pre-conciliar edition of the *Rituale Romanum*, which was issued in 1952. Section Ten lists and provides regulations for 13 different types of processions. One of these is the “Procession in the time of death and plague,” meaning in circumstances similar to the present situation if the coronavirus were to become a truly devastating epidemic. The format offered is the same as the Great Litanies or the Litany of the Saints, which are prayed on the ancient Rogation Days, with three different options for invocations and final prayers that may be varied according to circumstances. The second option asks God to cure the illnesses of body and spirit in such a way that “we may always rejoice in your blessing.” But it is above all the third option that seems most appropriate: it asks that God, being propitious to our prayers, drive away pestilence and death in such a way that “the hearts of mortal men may know that these scourges come to us from thy indignation, and their cessation occurs by thy mercy” [... *ut mortalium corda cognoscant, et te indignante talia flagella prodire, et te miserante cessare*]. Today such a prayer would be considered anthropologically, politically, culturally, and ecclesiastically incorrect, and yet Scripture teaches us that, as in the case of David’s census (cf. 2 Sam 24:1-25), this is exactly how it is!

In saying this we are not advocating a return to the “pre-conciliar” Church.

There is nothing to simply copy, but much that can inspire us. Maybe, if the coronavirus continues to spread, we could be inspired to organise a little procession on February 11, the Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, who is especially dedicated to the care of the sick and to remedy illnesses.