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Now and after the Coronavirus: what we have learned and how we must start again

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NOTHING WILL BE LIKE BEFORE

The epidemic associated with the spread of "COVID-19" has had a strong impact on

many aspects of human coexistence. Thus, it also requires an analysis from the perspective of Catholic Church's social doctrine. Contagion is above all a matter of physical well-being and, thus, already directly affects the common good. Our health is certainly part of this.

At the same time, it poses a problem regarding the relationship between humanity and nature, it invites us to overcome the naturalism that is very widespread today. It must be said that without man's good governance over nature natural disaster may occur and furthermore that a good and uncontaminated nature does not exist. This then poses a problem of participation in the common good as well as our solidarity, inviting us to ask what forms the basis of the principle of subsidiarity in terms of how the contributions of political and social subjects can provide solutions to the serious problem at hand and help society return to normalcy once the crisis has passed. It has become clear that these contributions must be articulated, convergent and coordinated. The financing of healthcare, a problem the coronavirus has brought to our full attentions, is a fundamental moral issue in the pursuit of the common good.

Urgent reflection is needed regarding the purposes of the healthcare system as well as its management and use of resources. This is especially so considering that recently we have seen significant reductions in the funding of medical facilities. Our economy and social peace are also linked to healthcare problems. We have seen how the epidemic has endangered the functionality of production and economic supply chains, including their blockage. Should this continue for an extended period of time, it will lead to bankruptcies, unemployment, poverty, social unease and conflict.

The world of work will surely be prone to major upheavals. New forms of support and solidarity will be necessary and drastic choices will have to be made. Economic concerns naturally coincide with banking and monetary issues and, thus, are connected to Italy's relations with the European Union. The EU is ultimately responsible for decisions in these two sectors and on which our country now depends. This, in turn, brings us back the question of national sovereignty and globalisation, while underscoring the need to reassess globalisation understood as a systemic globalist machine which is quite vulnerable due to its rigid and artificial internal interrelationships. We have hit a nerve: when overall systemic damage is produced yet difficult to recover. If lower social levels are deprived of their sovereignty, they will be crushed. On the other hand, the coronavirus has also highlighted the crisis of State "closures" showing they are unable to truly collaborate among themselves despite being

members of supranational institutions. Finally, the epidemic has brought to the fore how the Catholic faith is affected by the Church-State relationships. The suspension of public Masses and the shutting of churches represent only certain aspects of this problem.

So this is the complex picture of problems spurred by the coronavirus epidemic. These are issues that challenge the Church's social doctrine and which our Observatory feels called to offer some reflection and solicits outside contributions. Benedict XVI's encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, written in 2009 at the time of another major crisis, stated that "crisis obliges us to redesign our path, to give us new rules and to find new forms of commitment, to focus on positive experiences and to reject the negative ones. The crisis thus becomes an occasion for discernment and new planning."(n. 21)

THE END OF IDEOLOGICAL NATURALISM

Societies have been and are currently affected by various ideological forms of naturalism which circumstances related to this epidemic might correct. The exaltation of a pure and uncontaminated nature of which man is the polluter has never held its own weight and even less so nowadays. The idea of a Mother Earth as originally endowed with a harmonious balance and whose spirit with whom humanity should find its proper relationship is pure foolishness and which this experience could expose. Nature must be governed by man. New postmodern pantheistic ideologies (among others) are, therefore, inhuman ideologies. Nature, in the naturalistic sense of the term, also produces imbalances and diseases and, therefore, must be *humanised*. It's not man who must be naturalised, but nature that is must be humanised.

Revelation teaches us that creation is entrusted to the care and rule of man

whose ultimate end and purpose is found in God. Man has the right, because he has the duty to manage material creation, ruling over it and taking from it what necessary and useful for the common good. Creation is entrusted by God to man so that he may use it according to his reason and capacity for wise rule. Man is the regulator of creation, not the other way around.

THE TWO MEANINGS OF "SALUS"

"Salus", in Latin, means health, as we use in the word *salutary*. It's also in the root meaning of salvation, in the ethical-spiritual and, above all, religious sense. The current coronavirus crisis once again proves that the two meanings are interconnected. Threats to our physical health induce changes in our attitudes, ways of thinking and values we

pursue. Threats test the basis for morality in all of society. They demand ethically valid behaviours while our denouncing selfish, indifferent, and manipulative tendencies. They emphasize heroism in the common fight against contagion while condemning the looters and profiteers in such circumstances.

The fight against contagion requires a moral reset of human society with regard to healthy, supportive, respectful behaviours. Perhaps this is more important than resetting the ways in which we manage our resources. The challenge of maintaining physical health is, therefore, related to the challenge of maintaining moral health. We need a deep rethink of the immoral tendencies our society and at all levels. Natural misfortunes are often not entirely natural, but are rooted in morally disordered human attitudes. The origin of "COVID-19" virus has yet to be definitively clarified and it might well be shown that it is not of natural origin. However, even if a purely natural origin is acknowledged, its social impact calls into question our social ethics. The answer is not and will not be a merely scientific-technical one, but a moral one as well. After a technical solution is found, the other likelihood, due to the coronavirus crisis, is a revival of public morals based on new solid foundations.

PARTICIPATION IN THE COMMON GOOD

Our ethical participation in society is necessary because the common good is at stake. The coronavirus epidemic contradicts all those who have argued that the common good as a moral end does not exist. If so, what reason do people have, inside and outside institutions, to work and fight for "good" causes? What commitments would citizens have to respect when restrictive ordinances are in force if they have no moral commitments to the common good? On what basis then would we say that some behaviours are "right" at this critical point in time? Those who deny the existence of the common good or entrust its achievement by technique alone (and not also by moral commitments to the good) stand contradicted in face of today's facts. It is the common good that informs us that health is a good which all of us must promote. It is the common good that informs us that "salus" has two meanings.

Will this experience of the coronavirus rise lead to deepen and expand this concept of the common good? While struggling to save lives of so many people, nonetheless abortion procedures continue as do the sales of abortifacients and the practice of euthanasia. The destruction of human embryos and many other anti-life as well as anti-family procedures continue. If the common good is rediscovered together with the need for wholesale participation in the fight against the current epidemic, we should have the intellectual courage and will to extend the concept of the common good to where it

naturally must be applied.

SUBSIDIARITY IN THE FIGHT FOR HEALTH

The ongoing mobilization against the spread of coronavirus has seen the participation of institutions at many levels, some of which are better coordinated than others. Various tasks are done according individual responsibilities. When this is all over, we will have the chance to review what has not worked properly in localized, subsidiary sectors. We can then rediscover the important principle of subsidiarity so as to apply it better and wherever possible. When evaluating our experiences, subsidiarity must be seen as "for" and not as a defence "from" something. Subsidiarity must be for the common good and, therefore, must have an ethical and not only political or functionalistic basis. An ethical basis is founded on natural and finalistic orders of social life. The opportunity is well-disposed to abandoning conventional visions of values and social ends.

An important point now highlighted by the coronavirus emergency is the subsidiary role of credit. The blocking of large sectors of the economy to ensure greater health security by reducing the spread of the virus puts business and families in economic crisis, especially terms of in liquidity. If the crisis lasts for a much longer time, a crisis of circularity of production and consumption will occur, not to mention widespread unemployment. Faced with these needs, the role of credit can be fundamental and the financial system might well redeem itself from the many and reprehensible criticisms it has received in the recent past.

SOVEREIGNTY AND GLOBALIZATION

The ongoing experience of the coronavirus demands that we also reconsider the two concepts of globalization and national sovereignty. There is the globalization that interprets the whole planet in terms of a "system" of rigid joints and connections, as an artificial construction governed by insiders and a series of apparently unshakable intercommunicating institutions and persons. However, this concept has also proved it is not without a great weakness: all we have to do is to hit the system at one particular weak point and, by way of a domino effect, an avalanche is created. The current epidemic can put the health system in crisis, the quarantines can put production systems in crisis, and so this causes the economic system to collapse, while poverty and unemployment no longer help prop up the credit system, thus weakening the population which is then exposed to new epidemics and so on. A series of vicious circles wreak havoc of planetary proportions.

Until this epidemic hit, globalization waved banners of pride and glory. It was the perfect technical-functional system of indisputable certainty regarding the outmodedness of States and nations. It promoted the absolute value of "open societies". Globalization promoted one world, one religion, a universal morality. It was about one globalist nation united under a singular world authority. But then a virus may be all that is needed to bring down the entire system, since non-global response systems have been disabled. The experience we are living through right now warns us against an "open society" understood in this way, both because it places itself in the hands of the power of a few and because few other hands could make it fall just as quickly as a house of cards. This does not mean denying the importance of the international collaboration needed to resolve pandemics, yet such collaboration really has nothing to do with collective, mechanical, automatic and globally systemic structures.

THE EUROPEAN UNION'S DEATH BY CORONAVIRUS

These days have shown us once again just how much the European Union is divided and ethereal. A selfish rather than collaborative rapport exists among its member States. Italy has remained isolated and left to its own devices. The European Commission intervened late and the European Central Bank intervened poorly. As each EU nation has dealt with the epidemic, every single one has closed itself off from the others. The resources necessary for Italy to deal with the emergency (which at other times might have meant the devaluation of currency) now depend on EU decisions to which it must bow its head.

The coronavirus has revealed definitively the European Union's phoniness, as it is unable to unite its member States over which it has superimposed itself in exchange for their individual sovereignty. The lack of the moral glue was not compensated for by institutional and political glue. We must take note of the inglorious end of the European Union caused by the coronavirus. In the future we need to think how collaboration between European states in health crises is possible outside of supranational political institutions.

THE STATE AND THE CHURCH

The word "salus", as we have seen, applies to salvation and not just health. Health is not salvation, as martyrs have taught us, but in a certain sense salvation grants us health. The proper functioning of social life, with its beneficial effects on health as well, also

needs the very salvation that is promised to us by religion: "Man does not develop through his own powers." (*Caritas in Veritate*, 11).

The common good is of a moral nature and, as we said above, this crisis should lead to the rediscovery of our ethical dimension. But morality cannot exist in and of itself. Lately, morality has proved it has no foundation. Herein arises the problem of the essential relationship that political life has with religion. This is the relationship that best guarantees the truth of political life. Political authority weakens the fight against evil, as is happening with the current epidemic. This occurs when it equates Mass with leisure time activities. This is why political authorities believe Mass must be suspended, perhaps even before prohibiting other certainly less important social gatherings. Even the Church can make mistakes when it does not claim, in the name of the genuine and entire common good, the need for Holy Masses and the opening of churches. The Church contributes to the fight against the epidemic in the various forms of assistance, help and solidarity, as it has always done in similar cases in the past. It is appropriate, however, to bear in mind that the religious dimension of the Church's contribution is very high: it is not considered a mere expression of civil society. Thus, Pope Francis affirmed he prayed to the Holy Spirit that "may give to pastors the ability for pastoral discernment so that they might provide measures which do not leave the holy, faithful people of God alone, and so that the people of God will feel accompanied by their pastors, comforted by the Word of God, by the sacraments, and by prayer," naturally with the common sense and prudence the situation demands.

This coronavirus emergency can be experienced by everyone as "as if god does not exist" and in this case also in the next phase, once the health emergency is over, will continue to apply the same line of thinking. In this way, however, the connection between physical health and moral and religious health - which this painful crisis has brought to light - will have been long forgotten. If, on the contrary, the need we feel the need to again acknowledge God's place in the world, then relations between politics and the Catholic faith, between the State and the Church, will go down the proper path.

The current health emergency poses deep challenges to the Church's social doctrine. Our social doctrine is a wealth of faith and reason. It can offer great help even in the fight against infection and in all kinds of social and political struggles. Above all, the Church's social teachings can help to orientate us after the coronavirus. Together we must review all its truly important perspectives. Human social life requires coherence and synthesis, especially in times of difficulty, which is why men who know how to look deeply and vertically toward God can find solutions. They can even find opportunities to improve their situation with respect to past difficulties.