

A REFLECTION FOR THE MONTH OF APRIL – Bishop Sipuka

The pain and blessing of covid-19

Last week Friday, because of the Corona virus epidemic, Pope Francis gave a blessing called “urbi et orbi” (to the city and to the world) which is reserved only for Christmas day and Easter Sunday. In this way, the Pope showed his special solicitude to Italy which is the most hit country by covid-19 and the world where numbers of infection are rising by the day. On the 5th of March 1 case of infection was reported in South Africa and as we complete the month of March, there are now 1.353 and 4 deaths.

Providence for human solidarity in suffering

This is a humbling disease that cuts across humanity in the whole world with no consideration of whether one is rich or poor. It is a tiny invisible bacteria that is wreaking havoc more than the most powerful weapons of war can. The rich cannot protect themselves against it nor can they cure themselves because there is no cure against it yet. Unlike HIV/AIDS which is largely acquired through lifestyle, and can at times lead to judgemental attitudes and stigmatisation, Covid-19 allows no opportunity to point fingers for no one can fully behave oneself out of Coronavirus infection risk. Close to 100 priests have died in Italy from Covid-19.

It is one of those few moments in human life where a calamity makes us realise that regardless of wealth, class, race and age we are all feeble beings with no control of life and so we are brought into solidarity. As Pope Francis put it in his reflection, it is “a storm that exposes our vulnerability and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits, and priorities”.

A reason for anxiety

Never in the modern times has humanity been bound together by a common anxiety as Covid-19. All countries in the world are doing their best to stop its spread, and that is the best we can do so far. As people of influence, we must use that influence to join forces in encouraging people to adopt preventive measures that we all know of and to avoid behaviours that feed the spread. China, the country where the disease is reported to have originated is almost free of it now, thanks largely to preventative measures.

With our poor economic conditions, particularly for those people living in informal settlement, there is no certainty that the lockdown will be as successful as in China. One just needs to think of a family living in one room made of corrugated iron, if one of them is infected how difficult it will be not to have serial infection.

Already in Cape Town Khayelitsha informal settlement, a case of infection has been recorded. So there is a reason to be worried and scared because once this pandemic hits poor areas, it will decimate huge numbers of people, it will be a plague! With increasing numbers of infections daily, it is worrying that infections will now come from within the communities than from outside.

A call for compassion and action

As we engage in these preventative measures of social isolation and hygienic practices for longer periods, the stress on daily life also increases. My heart goes out to the majority of people who live by vending and doing piece jobs. Sitting at home for 21 days, and who knows if this period could be extended, means that these people now live without means to provide for themselves.

We pray to God that the lockdown will bring the desired effect and people can get on with their ways of making a living. What can we do for these people now, I ask myself because we are not able to go out, even if we could help some with food parcels? What shall we do when the lockdown is over because the indications are that the situation will get worse economically; if the recent 3rd junk rating of our economy is anything to go by? More and more people will not afford the basics.

It looks to me that we will need to continue in an intense way with the programme of feeding the hungry. Possibly this situation may call on us as clergy and religious to share our own food because resources from the faithful only will not be enough. I remember a homily by bishop Dowling on the year for Religious, where he recalled how the sisters had eggs once a week so that they can keep the fees for the learners low. I foresee us having to make such similar sacrifices.

An opportunity for deeper religious experience

Most people are rightly concerned about not being able to attend Church, particularly during the Holy Week leading to Easter. It feels awkward as priests not to be able to minister, say Mass and administer sacraments. Yet as the saying goes these days, loving your neighbour in these circumstances of Covid-19 means keeping a distance, and doing the opposite is a lack of love. We can make up for lack of contact by keeping in touch with the faithful through the cell phone and whatsapp, and those who can, by live streaming the Masses that we celebrate daily, with a short reflection on the readings.

It has also been noted that painful as this inability to worship in a normal way, it is a providential time to get to the heart of religion, namely to make religion serve a transformative personal contact with God instead of fulfilling a social expectation. It coincides well with Jesus' injunction on Ash Wednesday "to go to your private room and when you have shut your door to pray to your Father who is in that secret place". The inability to go to Church should not make us feel that we are deprived of a relationship with God because God is always with us.

This period, can be profitably used for reflection, prayer, self-examination, for reading those books that one has been postponing to read, for resting and above all to unite oneself with this global pain and anxiety in prayer.

Sr. Theresa Okure, in a beautiful reflection on how to be Church in the face of Covid-19 observes that even for families, this is a providential period to experience the original setting for worship, which were homes, Church buildings came at a later stage. She invites us to "recall that the Jewish Passover meal (Exod 12:1-11) which foreshadowed our Lord's Supper was a family meal and which today we call Mass. Each family was to celebrate it, and if a family was too small to finish the sacrificial lamb they were to join with another family. The early Christians celebrated the Lord's Supper in private homes, what biblical scholars call 'house churches' (cf. Acts 2:46)".

As already proposed in my letter of directives, encourage the families to keep in touch through the cell phone and whatsapp to participate in live streamed Masses and to do the suggested Holy Week and Easter services at home. In this way this pandemic will be a providential "help for families to pray together and parents will have time for their children and assume the God-given responsibility to accompany them during the worship and explain to them the different parts in their Sunday worship and maybe in all their prayers" (Okure).

Where is God in all this?

As far as continuing our relationship with God, this question should not arise because it provides us with different ways, and maybe even better ways of relating with Him. As far as the question of "why does God allow this?" brief answer is that we do not know but what we know is that God suffers with us and makes us his collaborators in responding to situations of suffering. And so because God suffers with us, let us not lose hope and because God

collaborates with us, while we must regularly wash our hands to avoid the virus, let us not wash our hands of our responsibility for each other, particularly the poor who feel the impact of the lockdown the most and who will be affected by the effects of the virus the most.

Finally, I wish you all a blessed Holy week and blessings of the Lord who will rise to empower us in dealing with Covid-19 and its effects.

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