



## SYMPOSIUM OF EPISCOPAL CONFERENCES OF AFRICA AND MADAGASCAR

### SECAM STATEMENT ON COVID-19 AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

*“God, hear me as I make my plea; protect me from this frightening enemy” (Ps 64:1)*

1. **Prayer:** We evoke this prayer in addition to the one we urged all to pray when we issued a brief Statement on corona virus on 6<sup>th</sup> March 2020. We do so to express, in these difficult times, our solidarity with the peoples of the African Continent and with all the sick infected with COVID-19, wherever they are. While we also pray for the peaceful repose of the souls of all who have lost their lives due to COVID-19, we consider it essential to share more thoughts on the pandemic.

2. **The Current Situation:** We are all aware that for the past six months, the world has faced an invisible enemy which is wreaking havoc everywhere, causing the death of thousands of people, of all age groups. No country is spared, even the developed countries, where the health systems<sup>1</sup> and facilities are known to be efficient. What is considered an unprecedented situation is that all categories or social classes have been affected by the disease: rich, poor, political leaders, senior managers, religious leaders, workers and people in fragile situations such as refugees, etc. In addition, the rate of spread of the pandemic is such that one can always expect an explosion of cases of contamination in places where social distance measures are difficult to adhere to, and the risk of transmission of the virus is so real.

We have seen that in an effort to contain the rapid spread of COVID-19, most governments including those of the African continent, have adopted drastic measures such as the closure of borders and lockdowns and have also recommended preventive measures including frequent washing of hands, social distancing and wearing of masks. In Africa, the measure of confinement has been more or less followed, but it is clear that its application has been difficult for most people who struggle every day for survival by carrying out activities in the informal sector.

Judging from its devastating effects, it can be said without doubt that the consequences of the pandemic are tragic. On the economic level, recession is evident due to the shutdown of activities, especially in key production sectors, in the tourism sector, air transport and the hotel industry. The social explosion is to be feared in many countries, and in particular, in Africa that is already burdened with debt and where unemployment continues to worsen, which further increases even more the phenomenon of impoverishment of the populations.

3. **A Moment of Faith and Trust in God who is always there for us:** Worried by the current situation, many people wonder if this pandemic is not a punishment inflicted by God on sinful humanity who turns away from him or ask why God allows people to suffer or whether this is not an omen that the end of the world is near. For those in the grip of anguish, it is easy to believe that the pandemic is punishment from God, who wishes to bring human existence to an end.

Nevertheless, even a cursory sift through Sacred Scripture reveals that God is the creator of the world and thus is not only in full control of creation all the time but also cannot turn against his own creation, which is very good (Gn 1:31). Moreover, being created in the image and likeness of God (Gn 1:26) implies that there is an imprint of God in each person. If, we experience pain or if we suffer, he participates in it in order to overcome it. St. Augustine said long ago: "Being

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<sup>1</sup> According to WHO, "the health system is the set of organizations, institutions, resources and people whose main objective is to improve health" (see WHO website: About health systems").

supremely good, God would not allow any evil in his works, unless in his omnipotence and goodness, he is able to bring forth good out of evil” (*Enchiridion* 11, 3; PL 40, 236)<sup>2</sup>.

Furthermore, Sacred Scripture emphatically asserts that God “loved the world so much that he gave his only begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost but may have eternal life” (Jn 3:16). Therefore, he allowed the Son to die a shameful death on the Cross to reconcile us to him (Rm 8:31-32; 5:10-11) and to liberate the entire humankind from evil and death. Accordingly, the author of First John has declared that “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8); he is kind, merciful, compassionate, and his plan for his people is always one of “peace, not disaster, [and] a future full of hope for [them]” (Jer 29:11).

As predicted in the book of Isaiah, Jesus himself experienced sorrowful moments and was familiar with suffering while on earth; he was despised, ill-treated, punished and crushed by men and “struck with affliction by God...yet he never opened his mouth” (Is 53:3-10; cf. Lk 22:63-65; 23:8-12; 35-38). Although he was fully aware that: “the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed” (Lk 9:22; Mtt 20:18-19; Mk 10:33-34), he surrendered himself. On mount Olives, Jesus withdrew from his disciples “and knelt down and prayed. Father, he said, if you are willing, take this cup away from me. Nevertheless, let your will be done, not mine” (Lk 22:41-43; Mtt 26:39). Thereafter, he cried out: “*Eli, eli, lama sabachthani?*” that is, My God, my God, why have you deserted me?” Again crying out in a loud voice, yielded up his spirit” (Mtt 27:45-50). But there was no immediate response from the Father until the moment of the resurrection. This urges us to always wait for God’s time.

It should be noted that Jesus willingly succumbed to agonizing and horrific cruelty, culminating with a disgraceful death on the Cross not because he did anything wrong but to change the meaning of every kind of suffering and pain, physical and moral; not only of those who have faith but of every human person<sup>3</sup>. If Jesus suffered innocently, suffering should no longer be looked upon as punishment for sins committed or a curse.

The book of Romans also assures us that nothing “can come between us and the love of Christ, even if we are troubled or worried or being persecuted or lacking food or clothes or being threatened or even attacked.... Neither death nor life, no angel, no prince, nothing that exists, nothing still to come, not any power or height or depth nor any created thing, can ever come between us and the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rm 8:31-39). Accordingly, corona virus and Covid-19 cannot separate anyone from the love of God and of his beloved Son, Jesus Christ.

**4. Commemoration of Pentecost:** Our current experience may be compared to that of the disciples of Jesus Christ after his death, resurrection and ascension. They were despondent, afraid and ‘huddled behind closed doors’ (Jn 20:19; Acts 1:12-13). But when the Holy Spirit descended on them on Pentecost day, he transformed them from fearful men to bold and courageous men, empowered them to proclaim the Good News of redemption, to witness to Christ from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:1-11; 2:1-47) and to suffer every kind of agony, humiliation, persecution and imprisonment for the sake of Christ (Acts 5:41).

Indeed, the Acts of the Apostles recounts time and again, the bitter experience of the early Christians, including the martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 7:55-8:2). But the Holy Spirit was always

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2 Cf. Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, Homily during the Celebration of the Passion of the Lord St. Peter’s Basilica Friday 10th April 2020, <https://www.vaticannews.va>, NewsletterVN-EN.

3 Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, Homily during the Celebration of the Passion of the Lord.

their companion, comforting, encouraging, counselling, empowering them, freeing their hearts from every form of panic and anxiety, guiding them in new directions, and making “the lukewarm thrill to new dreams. That is what it means to change hearts”<sup>4</sup>.

Brothers and sisters, till today, the Holy Spirit “penetrates the most unimaginable situations”, just as he did in the Acts of the Apostles, in which he is the main character, as held by Pope Francis<sup>5</sup>. Truly, the feast of Pentecost celebrates the unseen, immeasurable presence of God in our lives, in our Church and in the world. He quietly works in us and through us every day behind the scene in the basic activities of our lives and the lives of the people around us. In these days of corona virus pandemic, the Holy Spirit is working through those doctors, nurses, health workers, volunteers and caregivers who are on the frontline of this emergency, and are risking their lives night and day to save others, including priests who, in their pastoral concern and fidelity to the Gospel, are trying to help and support everyone<sup>6</sup>.

Lastly, Jesus’ name ‘Emmanuel’ means, God is with us. Be it a closed Church or confinement at home or hunger or disease or sickness, etc, God is continuously with each one everywhere in the world. The tool we urgently need these days is prayer for God to deepen our faith and trust in him<sup>7</sup>. Pope Francis said during the prayer vigil before the *urbi et orbi* blessing he recently gave in St. Peter’s Square that prayer and discreet service do not only inspire hope to those who are in doubt but are our winning weapons<sup>8</sup>. And the Church is not the only place for prayer, and not the only place to find God. Faith and prayer are equally part of Africa’s spiritual heritage, which can assist us to find meaning in life; they are similarly pillars for building “a civilization of love”, as St. John Paul II said<sup>9</sup>.

5. A Moment for Solidarity: In fact, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the limits of a globalization that has solely focused on the economy and advocating consumerism as well as individualism at the expense of ethical and spiritual values. The example that health professionals (those people who do not make the headlines, said Pope Francis)<sup>10</sup> have given by showing dedication and selflessness in their profession, at the risk of their lives has increased an awareness in developed and developing countries that the world after COVID-19 will no longer be as before; it is a new world in the making, one where equity will be more important than the frantic contest for success and profit<sup>11</sup>.

The Social Doctrine of the Church is always relevant when it emphasizes the common good, solidarity, respect for human dignity, justice and integral development, as Pope Francis has often recalled. Indeed, “The Church’s social doctrine holds that authentically human social relationships of friendship, solidarity and reciprocity can also be conducted within economic activity, and not only outside it or “after” it. (...) In this way it will be possible to experience and to *steer the globalization of humanity in relational terms, in terms of communion and the sharing of goods*”<sup>12</sup>.

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4 Pope Francis, Homily on Pentecost Day 2019.

5 Pope Francis, Homily on Pentecost Day 2019.

6 Letter of His Holiness, Pope Francis to the Faithful for the Month of May, 2020, 25th April 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. St John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 41.

<sup>8</sup> Homily delivered on March 20, 2020 in St. Peter’s Square.

<sup>9</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Building the civilization of love*, General Audience, 15.12.1999.

<sup>10</sup> Pope Francis, Homily of March 20, 2020, St Peter’s Square.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, 105.209.

<sup>12</sup> cf. Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 36. 42.

## 6. URGENT CALL FOR CONCRETE ACTIONS

**6.1 Appeal to Bilateral and Multilateral Groups:** Thinking beyond COVID-19, we, as leaders and representatives of the Church in Africa and Madagascar, would like to urgently appeal to officials of bilateral and multilateral aid agencies to take a closer look at the case of Africa, which is currently facing the problem of lack of resources in the fight against the pandemic and the lack of the safety kits for those who, working in the informal sector, have had to suspend their activities due to lockdowns. Undoubtedly, initiatives have already been taken in the management of the impact of the pandemic, but we would like to go further to plead for the massive cancellation of debts of African countries, to enable them to revive their economies.

In addition, we plead for substantial aid to be given to the countries to support the establishment of quality health systems; to promote the emergence of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) aimed at easing unemployment problem; and to support food security.

**6.2 Appeal to Multinational Companies and Business Owners:** Africa is a major supplier of raw materials to industrialized countries. Therefore, we call upon large companies which exploit these raw materials to make significant contributions to the host countries to enable them provide basic social services such as hospitals, schools, adequate and affordable housing. And since a race against the clock is currently engaged in developed countries to find an effective remedy for COVID-19, we call on the business community and the pharmaceutical companies (both formal and informal) not to exploit the situation to make profit but join in the efforts to provide care for vulnerable people.

**6.3 Appeal to African Union:** The health crisis caused by COVID-19 should prompt us to seek ways and means together to eradicate diseases like malaria and Tuberculosis, which continue to plague the continent. With this in mind, we call upon the African Union to sensitize member countries to contribute to the creation of a Solidarity Fund, which will be used to improve the health of the populations. We further urge African leaders to ensure that the limited available resources be used to assist those who really need help, especially, the poorest of the poor and do not end in the pockets of the politically connected people through corrupt practices.

**6.4 Appeal to Church Institutions:** We exhort all the Church institutions directly involved in this fight to remain steadfast and to work with other non-Church institutions in the promotion of good health for all people of Africa and Madagascar.

**7. Appreciation:** We appreciate the efforts that have been made by the respective governments to contain the brutal spread of the virus in the Continent and we encourage them to protect the health of the population. We also thank all the health professionals and religious nuns who have shown extraordinary dedication to alleviating the suffering of the sick.

**8. Conclusion:** Dear sons and daughters of the African continent, it is time to reactivate the value of solidarity that has shaped our societies to better face the impact of the pandemic and to be able to turn our economies around, while relying on the power of the Holy Spirit, who gives us the grace to love and to be compassionate. In this time when many are in dire need, let us help them to experience the love of God. In the same vein, let us not stigmatize those who have recovered from COVID-19 disease but accept them warmly and make them feel happy to be back to their families or communities. Let us further join forces to achieve a harmonious development, concerned to preserve human dignity and sustainability of future generations.

To all those infected and affected by COVID-19, we express our solidarity with you and offer our condolences to the families that have lost their loved ones. Be assured that the Church-Family-of-God in Africa carries you in her daily prayers and addresses supplications to the Risen Christ to help us to live in peace and in good health. We earnestly urge everyone to turn to the Holy Spirit daily and pray that he continues to fill the hearts of the faithful with hope and courage; to kindle in all peoples of the world the fire of his love; to renew the face of the earth, bring an end to the pandemic and pave the way for the emergence of a new world.

May the Virgin Mary, Queen of Africa, ensure the maternal protection for her children!



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31<sup>st</sup> May 2020