

Pope Francis on the COVID 19 epidemic

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The SARS COV 2 outbreak probably started in China in October 2021. It was not taken seriously, in the United States and Europe, before the finding of a first infected person with the virus, in the United States, on January 21, 2020. The first three cases were reported in France on January 24, 2020. The United Kingdom confirmed two cases in England on January 31. On the 19th of February the milestone of two thousand deaths was reached in China.

On February 22 Italy reported 32 more cases and on 25 February it announced its eleventh death. On February 26, the first French death from SARS-Cov.2 was recorded. On February 29, the number of cases in Italy passed the one thousand mark. On March 9, Italy decided to put the whole country under lockdown. in confinement. March 24: France passed the 1,000-death mark with 1,100 cases registered in hospital.

March 28: Italy passed the 10,000-death mark.

May 27: the United States passed the 100,000-death mark.

May 31: the six million mark is passed worldwide, two-thirds of which are in Europe and the United States.

September 27: 1 million deaths linked to Covid-19 were recorded worldwide.

In the lack of an effective treatment, the various governments fought the pandemic with the classic preventive epidemiological strategy of reducing contact between people (confinement, wearing a mask, distancing). In November 2020, the first effective vaccines against SARS-Cov.2, developed by Pfizer and BioNTech, came into play. These vaccines offered the first real hope that the pandemic may one day be stopped.

As of June 10, 2021, the SARSCov2 virus has caused 174 million cases of illness worldwide, resulting in 3.75 million deaths, for an overall mortality rate of 2.2% (Source WHO). The largest number of victims was in the United States of America (33.4 million cases, 592,000 deaths), followed by India (29 million cases, with 354,000 deaths) and Brazil (17 million cases, 474,000 deaths), the United Kingdom had 4,520,000 cases leading to 128,000 deaths, and France 5,616,000 cases leading to 109,000 deaths (1.9% mortality).

The Extraordinary Moment of Prayer in Times of Epidemic, March 27, 2020

Faced with the overwhelming rise of the SARS-Cov.2 epidemic, which has led to the introduction of severe lockdown measures in most of the affected countries, preventing all assemblies, forbidding meetings, and profoundly disturbing the life of the Church, Pope Francis will choose the Easter holidays to address the faithful of the whole world, undermined in their hope and tempted to withdraw into themselves. He has decided to hold an "Extraordinary Moment of Prayer in Times of Epidemic" on March 27, 2020, in St. Peter's Square. Pope Francis gave us a vigorous message, of Pastor, to "stand in the storm" in a lucid and active way, in solidarity and service. We all remember the image of the Pope, in the rain, alone in the vastness of St. Peter's Square in Rome, dark and deserted, the very expression of the world situation. As he spoke that evening, the situation looked as bleak as St. Peter's Square before Pope Francis. The situation on the epidemiological front seemed to be out of control. Covid-19 has already killed more than 25,000 people worldwide. Italy, which has

seen its worst death toll of nearly 1,000 in 24 hours, was then the country most affected by the epidemic, with more than 9,000 deaths and 86,000 cases. There was no effective treatment against SARS-COV.2 infection.

Yet, all was actually so dark. The first RNA vaccines have indeed already been developed and their very positive results have been made available to the public as of November 16, 2020. But whether it is Pfizer-BioNtech's BNT162b1 vaccine or Moderna's mRNA 1273 vaccine, they were ignored, even by specialists. So, hope for an end to the epidemic was low when Pope Francis spoke from St Peter Square, that night. The theme chosen by Pope Francis for his exhortation was that of the "Calming of the Storm", as reported in the Gospel according to St. Mark (Mk 4:35-41), a storm in the night, unexpected, catching the apostles while they were on the lake of Galilee, rowing together in the boat on their way back to Capharnaum, while Jesus slept at the stern, seemingly absent, indifferent. It is with these words of darkness, taken from the Gospel according to St. Mark, that the Pope begins his homily: "*When evening had come*" (Mk 4:35). Pope Francis' presentation of the epidemic like a dangerous, uncontrolled storm takes on a dramatic tone, the same one that the Evangelist Mark uses to present the situation of the apostles' boat, lost in the middle of the storm, on the Lake of Galilee: "*When evening had come*" (Mk 4:35). *The Gospel passage we have just heard begins like this. For weeks now it has been evening. Thick darkness has gathered over our squares, our streets and our cities; it has taken over our lives, filling everything with a deafening silence and a distressing void, that stops everything as it passes by; we feel it in the air, we notice in people's gestures, their glances give them away. We find ourselves afraid and lost. Like the disciples in the Gospel, we were caught off guard by an unexpected, turbulent storm. We have realized that we are on the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented, but at the same time important and needed, all of us called to row together, each of us in need of comforting the other. On this boat... are all of us. Just like those disciples, who spoke anxiously with one voice, saying "We are perishing" (v. 38), so we too have realized that we cannot go on thinking of ourselves, but only together can we do this*". This vigorous introduction thus highlights three themes, three closely associated themes, which speak well of the situation of the world, but also of the necessary survival reaction that this situation imposes on us:

- The state of man "caught off guard", who finds himself frightened and lost. Anesthetized by his belief in the omnipotence of technology, man finds himself fragile and disoriented.
- We are all in the same boat: this pandemic invites us to find each other, and to realize that we all need each other: this is the basis of solidarity, the central theme of this "Extraordinary Moment of Prayer", the theme that will remain at the forefront of all the subsequent interventions of Pope Francis on the epidemic
- We are called to row together: solidarity is active, collective. We realize that we "*cannot go on thinking of ourselves, but only together can we do this*".

The second strong point of this "extraordinary moment of prayer," which will be repeated as a leitmotif, an anchor of thought throughout this meditation, is provided by the question-supplication of the 12 apostles who note that Jesus is sleeping, even though the boat is in peril: "Teacher, do you not care if we perish?" (v. 38). Indeed, as Pope Francis notes, Jesus' attitude seems paradoxical: "*It is easy to recognize ourselves in this story. What is harder to understand is Jesus' attitude. While his disciples are quite naturally alarmed and desperate, he is in the stern, in the part of the boat that sinks first. And what does he do? In spite of the tempest, he sleeps on soundly, trusting in the Father; this is the only time in the Gospels we see Jesus sleeping. When he wakes up, after calming the wind and the waters, he turns to the disciples in a reproaching voice: "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" (v. 40).*

This passage speaks directly of the "silence of God" during the epidemic of the COVID19 that is beating at the sides of our boat. Jesus responds to the disciples' anguish in a rather harsh way, with an accusation: " *Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?*" (V. 40). And this accusation is directed at us, the believers, caught up in the epidemic: we have thought, or we think that Jesus is uninterested in us, that he does not care about our pleas. There is distrust on our part, we no longer believe Christ when He tells us that He is always with us. We think he is asleep: this thought touches the Lord deeply, painfully. Pope Francis comments that way on this back and forth of questions: " *Let us try to understand. In what does the lack of the disciples' faith consist, as contrasted with Jesus' trust? They had not stopped believing in him; in fact, they called on him. But we see how they call on him: "Teacher, do you not care if we perish?" (v. 38). Do you not care: they think that Jesus is not interested in them, does not care about them. One of the things that hurts us and our families most when we hear it said is: "Do you not care about me?" It is a phrase that wounds and unleashes storms in our hearts. It would have shaken Jesus too. Because he, more than anyone, cares about us.*"

Relating this exchange to our situation during the epidemic, Pope Francis draws a parallel between the disciples' frightened question and the cries we make to heaven: why does Christ accuse us of not having faith? Because we behave like anesthetized persons, asleep in our false and superfluous certainties. The storm of the pandemic "shows us how we have allowed to become dull and feeble the very things that nourish, sustain and strengthen our lives and our communities". After the theme of solidarity, Pope Francis advances that way second theme in his considerations on the pandemic: After the theme of solidarity, Pope Francis pushes thus forward a second theme in his considerations on the pandemic: that of the infantilism of the prayers that we address to the Lord, forgetting that we have largely distanced ourselves from Him, that we have allowed ourselves to be dizzy with our technical successes, that we have not listened to the cry of the poor and of our gravely ill planet, that we have closed our eyes in the face of the injustices, of the global wars. What Pope Francis reproaches society caught off guard by the epidemic is that it has fallen into "greed for profit", that it has allowed itself to be "caught up in things and lured away by haste". Neglecting the Lord's "reminders", "we carried on regardless, thinking we would stay healthy in a world that was sick". And it is now, after having ignored his "reminders" that, as a last resort, we accuse the Lord of "sleeping at the stern" and pretend to "wake him up". We are not the ones who have to "wake up Christ", but we are the ones who have to realize our indifference to his calls, our self-justifications when we are responsible for the sickness of our earth. There is a choice to be made. This is "a time of choosing, a time to choose what matters and what passes away, a time to separate what is necessary from what is not" This time of trial can become "a time of choice", a time of reorientation, of conversion.

Third theme: exemplary companions for the journey. Pope Francis, in almost all of his subsequent interventions on the COVID 19 epidemic, will never miss an opportunity to evoke the true heroes of the pandemic, those who gave service, courageously, in discretion, those who actually lived solidarity and service. " *We can look to so many exemplary companions for the journey, who, even though fearful, have reacted by giving their lives. This is the force of the Spirit poured out and fashioned in courageous and generous self-denial. It is the life in the Spirit that can redeem, value and demonstrate how our lives are woven together and sustained by ordinary people – often forgotten people – who do not appear in newspaper and magazine headlines nor on the grand catwalks of the latest show, but who without any doubt are in these very days writing the decisive events of our time: doctors, nurses, supermarket employees, cleaners, caregivers, providers of transport, law and order forces, volunteers,*

priests, religious men and women and so very many others who have understood that no one reaches salvation by themselves.”.

Fourth theme: instead of wanting to "wake up Jesus" we must "*invite Jesus into the boats of our lives.*" Pope Francis asks us here to renounce self-sufficiency, to realize that "alone we are shipwrecked", as the Twelve realized, but awkwardly. It is a matter of listening to the announcement "*He is risen and is living by our side*". "*Like the disciples, we will experience that with him on board there will be no shipwreck*". In this moment of crisis nourished by COVID 19, it is imperative to "*reawaken and revive our Easter faith*". How can we do this?

- By embracing all the hardships of the present time

- by abandoning for a moment our eagerness for power and possessions in order to make room for the creativity that only the Spirit is capable of inspiring.

- by developing new forms of hospitality, fraternity and solidarity.

" *By his cross,*" concludes Pope Francis, "*we have been saved in order to embrace hope and let it strengthen and sustain all measures and all possible avenues for helping us protect ourselves and others. Embracing the Lord in order to embrace hope: that is the strength of faith, which frees us from fear and gives us hope*".

Urbi et Orbi message of Pope Francis for Easter 2020

Following closely on the heels of the "Extraordinary Moment of Prayer" of March 27, 2020, Pope Francis' Urbi et Orbi message of Easter 2020 pays special attention to the COVID 19 epidemic. This message does not take up the themes previously presented, but addresses the people affected in one way or another by the epidemic. The Pope places his speech under the sign of hope, linked to the resurrection: "*Christ, my hope, has arisen!*".

The Pope's attention is especially directed towards the vulnerable victims of the epidemic: the elderly, the lonely, the vulnerable persons working in health care facilities, or living in barracks or prisons.

Another theme, also addressed for the first time by the Pope, is the impossibility for the faithful to have access to the sacraments because of restrictive lockdown measures. Here Pope Francis takes back the theme of the presence of the Risen Christ to his Church, already developed in the the *Extraordinary Moment of Prayer*. To the faithful who lament not being able to receive the Eucharist or the Sacrament of Reconciliation, Pope Francis indirectly recalls Christ's response to the distraught apostles in the storm: "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" (Mk 4:40). "*This disease has not only deprived us of human closeness, but also of the possibility of receiving in person the consolation that flows from the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist and Reconciliation. In many countries, it has not been possible to approach them, but the Lord has not left us alone! United in our prayer, we are convinced that he has laid his hand upon us (cf. Ps 138:5), firmly reassuring us: Do not be afraid, "I have risen and I am with you still!"*" (cf. Roman Missal, Entrance Antiphon, Mass of Easter Sunday). The answer is clear: we must remain united in prayer, living spiritually the presence of the Lord at our side.

The Pope then takes up the other theme that he had already presented in St. Peter's Square, during the "extraordinary moment of prayer" of March 2020: that of the "*exemplary companions for the journey*", working for the sake of common good while forgetting themselves. Pope Francis asks the Lord Jesus, our Passover, to "*grant strength and hope to doctors and nurses, who everywhere offer a witness of care and love for our neighbors, to the point of exhaustion and not infrequently at the expense of their own health*". extreme of their strength and often at the sacrifice of their own health.

Finally, the Holy Father addressed a theme that he had not yet presented in relation to the COVID 19 epidemic: the situation of the poor in the epidemic, and the fact that they are its first victims. Toward them too there is a duty of solidarity.

It is in this Urbi et Orbi message of Easter 2020 that Pope Francis introduces for the first time in his speech, for the SARS-Cov.2 epidemic, the notion of "common good" dear to the Church, by applying it to political leaders. He encourages them *“to work actively for the common good, to provide the means and resources needed to enable everyone to lead a dignified life and, when circumstances allow, to assist them in resuming their normal daily activities. to work actively for the common good of citizens, providing the means and instruments necessary to allow everyone to lead a dignified life and to promote, when circumstances permit, the resumption of normal daily activities.”*

Interview with the British weekly "The Tablet" of April 13, 2020,

On April 13, 2020 Pope Francis answered questions from British journalist Austen Ivereigh, which focused on the COVID 19 epidemic. This interview was widely reported around the world by the newspapers "The Tablet", "Commonwealth" and "Civiltà Cattolica". At the beginning of the interview, the Pope sets the tone by quoting a line from the Latin poet Virgil in his Aeneid, which exhorts us never to give up, but to know how to survive while waiting for more favorable moments: "in the midst of defeats, the advice is not to give up, but to take steps to survive, while waiting for better times: “to take care of the present for the sake of tomorrow,” which implies approaching the crisis with an inventive spirit, something Pope Francis had already expressed during the 'Extraordinary Moment of Prayer' in March 2020.

The particularity of this interview is the link that Pope Francis establishes between utilitarian attitudes, proper to our current society, where everything revolves around the economy, and the spread of the epidemic, allowed by the utilitarian culture of non-solidarity. In this culture, children with Down's syndrome are systematically suppressed: *"It is very unusual these days to meet Down's Syndrome peopled on the street"*. This is what Pope Francis calls the *"throwaway culture,"* a culture of "throwing away" everything that does not pay off. *"People are selected according to their usefulness and productivity,"* he observes.

At the end of the interview Pope Francis takes back the starting point of the exchanges, Virgil's Aeneid, specifically chosen to show the attitude that one must keep in front of the disaster of the pandemic: an attitude of patience, and of non-resignation, underlined in another verse of the Aeneid (II, 21), *“Cessi, et sublato montem genitore petivi”*. Two paths lie before him: to remain there to weep and end his life, or to follow what is in his heart, to go up to the mountain and leave the war behind. It is a beautiful verse. *Cessi, et sublato montem genitore petivi.* "I gave way to fate and, bearing my father on my shoulders, made for the mountain". *“This is what we all have to do now: to take with us the roots of our traditions and make for the mountain”*.

Fratelli Tutti, October 3, 2020

Coming a few months after the "Extraordinary Moment of Prayer," the encyclical Fratelli Tutti given to the world by Pope Francis on October 3, 2020, is the third document in which he has addressed, albeit succinctly, the issue of the SARS-Cov.2 epidemic. The Encyclical is not intended to delve into this issue, but the allusion to it is precise and firm. The Covid-19 pandemic had already claimed at least 1,029,593 lives worldwide with nearly 34,700,000 officially diagnosed cases of infection since the beginning of the epidemic. Brazil had passed

the 5 million mark, with 150,000 deaths. Pope Francis severely judges the lack of unity in the face of the pandemic, both at governmental levels and in civil society. He writes in paragraph 7: « *As I was writing this letter, the Covid-19 pandemic unexpectedly erupted, exposing our false securities. Aside from the different ways that various countries responded to the crisis, their inability to work together became quite evident. For all our hyper-connectivity, we witnessed a fragmentation that made it more difficult to resolve problems that affect us all. Anyone who thinks that the only lesson to be learned was the need to improve what we were already doing, or to refine existing systems and regulations, is denying reality* ». "While this passage is brief, it nevertheless contains the essential elements of Pope Francis' interventions on COVID 19, as part of an Encyclical dedicated to social fraternity and friendship. The central point in "Fratelli tutti" is the value of solidarity as the fruit of personal conversion to the calls of Christ. The Holy Father writes (114).

"I would like specially to mention solidarity, which, "as a moral virtue and social attitude born of personal conversion, calls for commitment on the part of those responsible for education and formation. I think first of families, called to a primary and vital mission of education. Families are the first place where the values of love and fraternity, togetherness and sharing, concern and care for others are lived out and handed on." (87)

The statement is very general and does not refer to the SARS-Cov.2 epidemic, but the following paragraph clarifies its scope, linking solidarity, responsibility and service: " 115. *At a time when everything seems to disintegrate and lose consistency, it is good for us to appeal to the "solidity"[88] born of the consciousness that we are responsible for the fragility of others as we strive to build a common future. Solidarity finds concrete expression in service, which can take a variety of forms in an effort to care for others. And service in great part means "caring for vulnerability, for the vulnerable members of our families, our society, our people". 89 "In offering such service, individuals learn to "set aside their own wishes and desires, their pursuit of power, before the concrete gaze of those who are most vulnerable... Service always looks to their faces, touches their flesh, senses their closeness and even, in some cases, 'suffers' that closeness and tries to help them. Service is never ideological, for we do not serve ideas, we serve people".[89]*

Pope Francis adds that the word "solidarity" does not always please and does not please everyone, because it implies a reversal of action, a change of vision, the passage from an attitude turned towards one's own interest to one in which it is the interest of the other that counts. It expresses more than just generosity: (116) *"Solidarity is a word that is not always well received; in certain situations, it has become a dirty word, a word that dare not be said. Solidarity means much more than engaging in sporadic acts of generosity. It means thinking and acting in terms of community. It means that the lives of all are prior to the appropriation of goods by a few. It also means combatting the structural causes of poverty, inequality, the lack of work, land and housing, the denial of social and labour rights. It means confronting the destructive effects of the empire of money[...]*

Urbi et Orbi message of Easter 2021

The most recent text from Pope Francis referring to the COVID 19 pandemic is his Urbi et Orbi message of Easter 2021. In it, the Pope acknowledges that "the pandemic is still ongoing" with the "social and economic crisis" that accompanies it. He again presents the Risen Christ as "hope for all those who are still suffering because of the pandemic, for the sick and for those who have lost a loved one. It is in this message that the Pope makes his first reference to vaccines, which he presents as "an essential instrument" in the fight against

SARS-Cov.2. At the same time that he strongly supports global vaccination campaigns, he also warns of the inequalities that are already emerging in these campaigns, marked by a privileged distribution of vaccines to industrialized countries, which alone are financially capable of procuring them.

" Everyone, especially the most vulnerable among us, requires assistance and has the right to have access to necessary care. This is even more evident in these times when all of us are called to combat the pandemic. Vaccines are an essential tool in this fight. I urge the entire international community, in a spirit of global responsibility, to commit to overcoming delays in the distribution of vaccines and to facilitate their distribution, especially in the poorest countries."

Conclusion

From the "Extraordinary Moment of Prayer in Times of Epidemic" of March 27, 2020," to the Urbi et Orbi message of Easter 2021, while passing through the encyclical "Fratelli tutti" of October 3, 2020, Pope Francis has followed the unfolding of the COVID 19 epidemic as a Pastor for his people, emphasizing the need for solidarity in the face of the scourge, urging us not to give in to the fears of the "night", and inviting us to find ourselves as believers in the presence of the Risen Lord. The most developed document he gave us on this subject is certainly that of the "Extraordinary Moment of Prayer" of March 27, 2020.

It is above all the theme of Solidarity that stands out in the forefront of all these messages of Pope Francis. He presented this theme in a broad way in "Fratelli tutti". He represents it in his messages on the pandemic, to clarify what the attitude of Christians should have in the face of this ordeal: not an attitude of fear and withdrawal, but an attitude of service and solidarity, for the common good.

Pope Francis did not miss any opportunity to introduce those who are the real "heroes" of the epidemic, those discreet, efficient people who have provided all the services during this period of crisis, and in particular the medical personnel.

Pope Francis refused to intervene in the sometimes controversial discussions that accompanied and still accompany the management of the epidemic in the various countries. It is only this year, 2021, that he has begun to take into account in his statements the need for vaccination, in the perspective of service and solidarity developed with "Fratelli Tutti".

Pope Francis may have appeared to some to be a bit backward in his statements on COVID19 and the attitude that Christians should have in the face of this pandemic. However, everything is said in the "Extraordinary Moment of Prayer in Times of Epidemic" of March 2020. The Pope makes us aware of our responsibilities. He chases away our paralyzing fears. He invites us to "come together," to "realize that we all need each other". He enjoins us to "*row together, each of us in need of comforting the other*" in a spirit of service and solidarity. He offers us "exemplary companions for the journey", who act in discretion, efficiency, and give themselves in a non-demanding way. He asks us to "come out of our anesthesia" to take our share of the world's pain.

The profound thought of Pope Francis, inspired by the Gospel of the "Calming of the Storm", is that it is not a question of raising our arms to heaven in confronting the SARS-Cov.2, in order to "wake up Jesus", but that we must renounce our self-sufficiency in order to listen to the proclamation "*He is risen and is living by our side*". We must "*invite Jesus into the boats of our lives*". It is up to us to get out of our hyper individualism, of our illusions regarding the

powers of science, and of self-justifications, in order to allow "*new forms of hospitality, fraternity, and solidarity*". In this sense, the struggle against COVID 19 would join the struggle for the respect of the earth, in the perspective of the "total ecology" widely developed in the encyclical *Laudato Si*.