

Pope Francis: A Crisis Reveals What Is in Our Hearts

To come out of this pandemic better than we went in, we must let ourselves be touched by others' pain.

By Pope Francis

Pope Francis is the head of the Catholic Church and the bishop of Rome.

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In this past year of change, my mind and heart have overflowed with people. People I think of and pray for, and sometimes cry with, people with names and faces, people who died without saying goodbye to those they loved, families in difficulty, even going hungry, because there's no work.

Sometimes, when you think globally, you can be paralyzed: There are so many places of apparently ceaseless conflict; there's so much suffering and need. I find it helps to focus on concrete situations: You see faces looking for life and love in the reality of each person, of each people. You see hope written in the story of every nation, glorious because it's a story of daily struggle, of lives broken in self-sacrifice. So rather than overwhelm you, it invites you to ponder and to respond with hope.

These are moments in life that can be ripe for change and conversion. Each of us has had our own "stoppage," or if we haven't yet, we will someday: illness, the failure of a marriage or a business, some great disappointment or betrayal. As in the Covid-19 lockdown, those moments generate a tension, a crisis that reveals what is in our hearts.

In every personal "Covid," so to speak, in every "stoppage," what is revealed is what needs to change: our lack of internal freedom, the idols we have been serving, the ideologies we have tried to live by, the relationships we have neglected.

When I got really sick at the age of 21, I had my first experience of limit, of pain and loneliness. It changed the way I saw life. For months, I didn't know who I was or whether I would live or die. The doctors had no idea whether I'd make it either. I remember hugging my mother and saying, "Just tell me if I'm going to die." I was in the second year of training for the priesthood in the diocesan seminary of Buenos Aires.

I remember the date: Aug. 13, 1957. I got taken to a hospital by a prefect who realized mine was not the kind of flu you treat with aspirin. Straightaway they took a liter and a half of water out of my lungs, and I remained there fighting for my life. The following November they operated to take out the upper right lobe of one of the lungs. I have some sense of how people with Covid-19 feel as they struggle to breathe on a ventilator.

I remember especially two nurses from this time. One was the senior ward matron, a Dominican sister who had been a teacher in Athens before being sent to Buenos Aires. I learned later that following the first examination by the doctor, after he left she told the nurses to double the dose of medication he had prescribed — basically penicillin and streptomycin — because she knew from experience I was dying. Sister Cornelia Caraglio saved my life. Because of her regular contact with sick people, she understood better than the doctor what they needed, and she had the courage to act on her knowledge.

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Another nurse, Micaela, did the same when I was in intense pain, secretly prescribing me extra doses of painkillers outside my due times. Cornelia and Micaela are in heaven now, but I'll always owe them so much. They fought for me to the end, until my eventual recovery. They taught me what it is to use science but also to know when to go beyond it to meet particular needs. And the serious illness I lived through taught me to depend on the goodness and wisdom of others.

This theme of helping others has stayed with me these past months. In lockdown I've often gone in prayer to those who sought all means to save the lives of others. So many of the nurses, doctors and caregivers paid that price of love, together with priests, and religious and ordinary people whose vocations were service. We return their love by grieving for them and honoring them.

Whether or not they were conscious of it, their choice testified to a belief: that it is better to live a shorter life serving others than a longer one resisting that call. That's why, in many countries, people stood at their windows or on their doorsteps to applaud them in gratitude and awe. They are the saints next door, who have awakened something important in our hearts, making credible once more what we desire to instill by our preaching.

They are the antibodies to the virus of indifference. They remind us that our lives are a gift and we grow by giving of ourselves, not preserving ourselves but losing ourselves in service.

With some exceptions, governments have made great efforts to put the well-being of their people first, acting decisively to protect health and to save lives. The exceptions have been some governments that shrugged off the painful evidence of mounting deaths, with inevitable, grievous consequences. But most governments acted responsibly, imposing strict measures to contain the outbreak.

Yet some groups protested, refusing to keep their distance, marching against travel restrictions — as if measures that governments must impose for the good of their people constitute some kind of political assault on autonomy or personal freedom! Looking to the common good is much more than the sum of what is good for individuals. It means having a regard for all citizens and seeking to respond effectively to the needs of the least fortunate.

It is all too easy for some to take an idea — in this case, for example, personal freedom — and turn it into an ideology, creating a prism through which they judge everything.

The coronavirus crisis may seem special because it affects most of humankind. But it is special only in how visible it is. There are a thousand other crises that are just as dire, but are just far enough from some of us that we can act as if they don't exist. Think, for example, of the wars scattered across different parts of the world; of the production and trade in weapons; of the hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing poverty, hunger and lack of opportunity; of climate change. These tragedies may seem distant from us, as part of the daily news that, sadly, fails to move us to change our agendas and priorities. But like the Covid-19 crisis, they affect the whole of humanity.

Look at us now: We put on face masks to protect ourselves and others from a virus we can't see. But what about all those other unseen viruses we need to protect ourselves from? How will we deal with the hidden pandemics of this world, the pandemics of hunger and violence and climate change?

If we are to come out of this crisis less selfish than when we went in, we have to let ourselves be touched by others' pain. There's a line in Friedrich Hölderlin's "Hyperion" that speaks to me, about how the danger that threatens in a crisis is never total; there's always a way out: "Where the danger is, also grows the saving power." That's the genius in the human story: There's always a way to escape destruction. Where humankind has to act is precisely there, in the threat itself; that's where the door opens.

This is a moment to dream big, to rethink our priorities — what we value, what we want, what we seek — and to commit to act in our daily life on what we have dreamed of.

God asks us to dare to create something new. We cannot return to the false securities of the political and economic systems we had before the crisis. We need economies that give to all access to the fruits of creation, to the basic needs of life: to land, lodging and labor. We need a politics that can integrate and dialogue with the poor, the excluded and the vulnerable, that gives people a say in the decisions that affect their lives. We need to slow down, take stock and design better ways of living together on this earth.

The pandemic has exposed the paradox that while we are more connected, we are also more divided. Feverish consumerism breaks the bonds of belonging. It causes us to focus on our self-preservation and makes us anxious. Our fears are exacerbated and exploited by a certain kind of populist politics that seeks power over society. It is hard to build a culture of encounter, in which we meet as people with a shared dignity, within a throwaway culture that regards the well-being of the elderly, the unemployed, the disabled and the unborn as peripheral to our own well-being.

To come out of this crisis better, we have to recover the knowledge that as a people we have a shared destination. The pandemic has reminded us that no one is saved alone. What ties us to one another is what we commonly call solidarity. Solidarity is more than acts of generosity, important as they are; it is the call to embrace the reality that we are bound by bonds of reciprocity. On this solid foundation we can build a better, different, human future.

Pope Francis is the head of the Catholic Church and the bishop of Rome. This essay has been adapted from his new book "Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future," written with Austen Ivereigh.

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