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+ Michael Neary

Covid-19 – A Challenge to Faith

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On the occasion of his *Urbi et Orbi* blessing on 27 March 2020 in an empty St. Peter's Square, Pope Francis, addressing the Lord in prayer said: "[The Coronavirus] is not a time of your judgement, but of our judgement, a time to chose what matters and what passes away, a time to separate what is necessary from what is not. It is a time to get our lives back on track with regard to you, Lord, and to others". Reflecting on the challenge contained in these words of the Holy Father I am reminded of the French Philosopher, Paul Ricoeur, who spoke of our experience of human life as moving from a time of orientation to disorientation or dislocation and on to a new orientation. In many respects these broad categories may be helpful as we reflect on what has taken place and where and who we are as we struggle with the chilling challenge of the Coronavirus.

In the time of *orientation* we inhabited a predictable world, routine, regular. We were uncritical and to a large extent felt undisturbed, tranquil, with a sense of being in control of situations. The experience of *disorientation* is sudden, sharp, unsympathetic and shattering. It leaves us with serious questions, disillusioned and in turmoil. The time of disorientation does not last forever. As we work our way through it with the help of the Lord and the support of others, we begin ever so slowly to move forward into a new phase of *reorientation* as we begin to put the broken pieces and jagged edges together again in a new way. The time of reorientation will be new, unexpected, unpredictable. It will not be a restatement of the old.

ORIENTATION

Focusing firstly on the experience of orientation as we reflect on our situation prior to Covid-19, where we were, what values we upheld and how these values influenced or determined our way of life. In that time of orientation, in a general way we lived in a bubble and perhaps to use a word much in vogue at present we were "cocooned" and possibly even seduced by a consumerist

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culture. Artificially created needs contributed to over-production of goods. These were aggressively advertised to convey the illusion of fulfilment, happiness and success. Competition and individualism were coping mechanisms in this situation. In many ways this was a closed world. We were led by and became very dependent on the market. We experienced a sense of control and were able to forecast storms, climatic conditions and the ebb and flow of the economy. In this situation we sensed that we were self-sufficient, we recognised and insisted on our rights, possibly at times to the neglect of our responsibilities and duties. Questions inevitably arose for us from time to time as we coped with personal or family crises. It may have been the death of a dear one, betrayal or a broken relationship. In the broader society however there was by and large an uncritical, unreflective approach. Yet there were indications that our world had become too introspective. Our utilitarian approach was being challenged in a number of ways as we were encouraged to focus on other parts of our world and on the planet itself. Limited supplies of water and oil were squandered and the resources of the environment were abused.

The marginalisation of faith and religious values tended to deprive us of our critical faculties so we did not question where society was going or the speed at which we were heading. Competition left little room for co-operation. Multi-tasking was the name of the game and peoples' identity was defined frequently by possessions, prestige and performance. In our religious faith there were pointers to an alternative approach to human living. In this situation we may have been inclined to adopt a legalistic approach to some of the challenges issued by our faith, resulting, either in our failure to see the real purpose of the contribution which our faith can make, or dismissing faith as not being relevant in the socio-economic setting of our culture where a premium is placed on the producer-consumer cycle. Just to take one example, the Sabbath. One can so easily adopt a legalistic approach to the Sabbath. Yet properly understood the Sabbath draws lines of dignity and respect around people. In this way it challenges the producer-consumer mentality. In doing so it enables us to slow down, to take note of things which we tended either to overlook or dismiss. The recent "lockdown" has made us aware of the speed at which we were moving, the busyness of our lives and the people and things which are part of our world.

DISORIENTATION

The coronavirus exploded on our world and scattered like shrapnel all over the globe. We experienced a sharp and sudden

disorientation, dislocation and were deeply traumatised. Disruption, disillusionment and death became the focus. We realised that the whole world is involved and we are very much part of it. Not being able to visit with family and friends, restricted mobility, loss of employment, being unable to worship with others in sacred places, the sense of isolation – all of this is deeply disconcerting. We are reminded of the things which we had enjoyed and taken for granted - our travel, holidays, sporting events and pilgrimages. Of course thanks to modern technology and social media we can still keep in contact with others. The sheer devastation caused by this microscopic virus however had effectively shut down the whole world – St. Peter's Square, Bondi Beach and places which were hives of activity were empty. We wonder and worry about the results of all this which will be far reaching in terms of physical, psychological, emotional health and well-being as well as for the economy. Our fragility and vulnerability has been exposed; our confidence is shattered and the control which we thought we had seems to be an illusion. Economically, politically and socially we are challenged.

REORIENTATION

The present experience constitutes a huge challenge to our faith. As we cope with the present crisis we witness signs of a new period of reorientation emerging. In so many ways this challenge brings out the best in people, awakening the need for and appreciation of connectivity and community. Goodness, generosity and gentleness are evident in service, neighbourliness and voluntarism. All of this became abundantly clear in the responsibility which is being expressed by the way in which people abided by the restrictions for the good of all. We witness the sacrifices which families made on sad occasions like funerals, the way in which grandparents were no longer in a position to call on or welcome their grandchildren who provide them with such joy and hope. Our courage, our confidence and our hope are being called upon and challenged in a very special way at this sad time.

Our faith will not provide easy answers to our questions, yet, faith, I believe, will help to provide perspective in which we will be enabled to address the challenges. In this new reorientation we cannot and should not expect to return to where we were prior to Covid-19. The anguish which we have been experiencing must engender a reflection on where we were, the values we prized and promoted during what we considered our time of tranquillity in the past where we considered ourselves to be self-sufficient, relatively comfortable and in control. These values and ideals will

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not be sufficient to sustain us as we move to the new era. What have we learned in our recent experience? Has our independence been called into question? Where is the Lord in all of this? Are we open to receive and foster the newness, solidarity and values which are emerging or are we endeavouring to hold on to and return to our pre-Covid days? Who knows what the future will be like? We cannot predict or programme it. However as a people of faith and Easter hope we trust in a God who hears and answers expressions of disorientation and will resolve our experiences of such. As hope-filled people we commit ourselves to welcoming and contributing to the decisive transformation made possible by a God who brings order out of chaos, light out of darkness and new life out of situations where none seemed possible. Returning to the prayer of Pope Francis which I quoted at the outset, the new orientation will involve us welcoming ‘a time to chose what matters and what passes away, a time to separate what is necessary from what is not. It is a time to get our lives back on track with regard to the Lord and to others’.

God and Liturgy. The immanence of Gods presence in the liturgy, expressed in so many ways, makes no sense unless it points to God’s transcendence. That is why the wider architectural and artistic context in which the liturgy is celebrated is so important. One does not have to be aesthete to appreciate beauty. The danger, perceived by St Augustine, is to admire the beauty *per se*, in itself, rather than be led through it and by it to what it signifies, what lies beyond words and eyesight. To the believer, all creation must be transparent of God.

– JOHN AINSLIE, *Beyond the Altar* (London: Benedicamus) p. 278.