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A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

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pandemics let us
dream

May 2021

In a time of pandemics let us dream

Michael G. Lawler and Todd A. Salzman

We live in a time of trial. The covid-19 pandemic is a major trial and we are wearing masks, keeping safe-distance, and getting vaccinated to protect ourselves and all those with whom we come in contact. These actions are our moral obligations in this pandemic, concrete ways to respond to Jesus' great commandment: "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31). It is also our moral obligation to protect ourselves and others in two other major world pandemics that do not get as much publicity, the pandemics of poverty and violence.

A TIME TO SEE

We cannot do anything against these pandemics unless we first *see* the reality of the world we live in. Did you know, for instance, that 3.7 million people died of hunger across the world in the first half of 2020? Did you know that six separate glaciers in the Antarctic ice sheet are now in a state of unstoppable melting that will lead to a rise in sea levels of about four feet. That sea level will lead to floods that will inundate millions of acres of land, displace some 204 million people, and destroy much of the rice-growing regions of Asia. The tragic results of a potato famine are well known in sparsely populated Ireland but the potato famine will pale in comparison to the results of a coming rice famine in densely populated Asia. There will be an incalculable and devastating increase in world poverty and hunger due to climate change. A quick scan of your morning paper will alert you to the extent of the pandemic of violence throughout the world. We read of heightened physical and sexual violence against women and children, of violence against gays and lesbians, against people of colour, against the homeless, against the poor and vulnerable. We read of gang violence, drug violence, street violence, a veritable pandemic of violence. Our papers have recently been filled with the horrors of State- and Church-sponsored violence against unwed mothers

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and their babies, provoked by the Catholic Church's refusal to understand or address human sexuality in a healthy, holistic way. We read also of so many wars and rumors of wars that very few ever bother to report the number of maimed and dead they produce.

The pandemics of poverty and violence are unlike the covid-19 pandemic in that they are caused, not by some runaway virus but by evil human actions. Like covid-19, however, they can be vaccinated against, not by some expensively-produced vaccine that will place cure beyond the reach of the poorest countries and peoples who need it most but by the conversion of humans from morally evil to good actions. That, you say, is easier said than done, and you are right. That will take not a simple jab or two in the arm but a determined, concerted, and ongoing program. Good Jesuit that he is, Pope Francis offers such a program in his new book entitled *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future*. His proposed program is the well-known Jesuit three-step program: see, judge, act.

We first need to see, we need to open our eyes and our hearts to see our world, not the big, wide world that we actually cannot really see but the small, narrow world in which we live and can see what is going on. Seeing the big, wide world can be like a flood that overwhelms and drowns us in depression and inaction, like the biblical flood against which Noah built his ark. Really seeing our small, narrow world can convince us that we already have in our hands the required vaccine against the pandemics of hunger and violence, namely, do something. If the coronavirus pandemic has taught us anything, it is that we are intelligent and dedicated enough to do something to combat it and its outcomes. We have all marveled at and admired the caretakers, the health care workers, the hospital staffs, nurses, and doctors, who have risked, and sometimes given, their own lives to save the lives of others. They are heroes we say. Many of them are more than heroes, they are Christians proclaiming with Christ "I came not to be served but to serve" (Mark 10:45). They have not been reckless, they did not seek death and did their best to protect themselves against it, but they worked to save the lives of others at the risk of losing their own. They are outstanding exemplars and witnesses for us, teaching us that we can do something against pandemics, even when we think we are helpless.

The coronavirus pandemic has heightened and exposed both the pandemics of poverty and violence. It has provided a window to clearly see these other pandemics, which have existed in the larger world perspective but have not always been evident in our small world perspective. People have lost their jobs and incomes, and many are threatened with the loss of the homes they worked so hard to acquire. They are living under a stress that is a new

and seemingly incurable disease for them. Some, who have never before faced this situation, need food to feed their families; some need shelter from the winter cold and, in the global south, some need shelter from the relentless and desiccating sun. Some, who have faced this situation regularly in their lives, need support as never before. Some, overwhelmed by the anxiety and stress, have taken to violence against their families; others, in the search for the means to survive, are driven to aggravated assault against those who appear to possess those means. We live in a time of great trial, but again we have exemplars and witnesses, this time not only healthcare workers but also ordinary people like ourselves, our neighbors, who seeing the need and judging that they can do something about it are acting to help their neighbours. Some are providing the hungry with food, others are offering shelter and whatever financial support they can, and still others are providing neighborly support against the anxiety and the stress. If we can see some of our ordinary neighbours making a difference in the presently heightened pandemics, then surely we can see that we too can do something to make even a small difference.

Pope Francis lists three ways of escaping reality that prevent us from seeing, all of which set up roadblocks to any helpful action. The first is *narcissism*, excessive self-love or concern exclusively with one's own self. For the narcissist, an action is good only if it is good for her/him and bad if it is any way bad for her/him, irrespective of its effect for others. Narcissism can cast me as the principal victim in any pandemic, thereby blocking out concern for others. Narcissism is characteristic of the so-called "me generation" and ignores the reality of everyone and everything else around me. Narcissism, it is to be noted, is *extreme*, individualistic self-love not to be confused with the measured and altruistic self-love that is good and necessary for one's own and others' human flourishing. Jesus' commandment to love our neighbours as *ourselves* is a commandment first to love ourselves, but not in the narcissistic extreme that excludes our neighbors. The second roadblock is *discouragement* that robs people of the courage to undertake an action and deters them from helping others. Discouragement can so blind us to the possibilities of what we can do in a situation that we see only the impossibilities of what we cannot do and get completely cut off from the reality and people around us. It is probable that many of us have been tempted to discouragement in the face of the three pandemics under discussion and it is certain that many of those most directly affected by them have yielded to it, reducing their capacity to react against it. The third roadblock to positive action is *depression*, a psychological condition characterized by a sense of hopelessness in the face of challenging situations.

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Depression is often accompanied by discouragement and paralysis when action is called for. Again, many of us have probably been tempted to depression when faced with the enormity of the three pandemics, but we have also been encouraged to hopefulness and action by the example of the ordinary people we see doing what they can to overcome them.

A TIME TO JUDGE AND TO ACT

After seeing and discerning the actual reality in our world today, we then have to judge what action we can take. After centuries of reflection on how the followers of Christ are to live in the world, the Catholic Church's social teaching offers principles for reflection which, in turn, offer criteria for judgment and Christian action. We mention first the principle of the *common good*, the principle that demands that, when we act, we act for the good of people as a whole. The common good in the abstract is the good we all share in the world as fellow creatures of the one creator God; in the concrete, it is the goods we share in common and should, therefore, be used and protected for all. We think of our environment, the land, air, and water which God creates for the benefit of all and how it is now severely threatened by what is broadly called climate change. We think also of the human rights to food and shelter. Our lands are being poisoned by pesticides, our air is being poisoned by toxic gases, to a large extent gases from our cars, and water from melting ice masses is threatening to inundate large areas of the world's land and the people who live in it. The loss of the human rights to food and shelter accompanies the loss of land and, as always, those most threatened are the poor. Seeing this situation and judging the gravity of its threat to the common good and even to human existence itself, we cannot avoid the judgment that something must be done to protect our environment and the common good before it is too late. Fifty-five years ago, the head of the American Petroleum Institute spoke of the dangers of pollution to our environment and warned that time was running out to save the world's people from its catastrophic consequences. If he were to judge today, he would have to judge that in some parts of the world time has already run out. We must read the "signs of the times" and see the reality of our world now, judge what we can do in our small, narrow world to protect it, and act accordingly. That action is as much a moral obligation as getting vaccinated against covid-19 today. Tomorrow may be too late.

Closely allied to the principle of the common good is the principle of *solidarity*, which recognizes and demands the interrelationship and interdependence of all human beings. That interrelationship

has two profound roots: we are all, first, creatures of the same Creator-God and, therefore, sisters and brothers of one another and we are all, second, created equally human. We *are*, therefore, our brother's and sister's keepers. The responsibility for all our neighbors applies to both individuals and nations. Individually, we are to facilitate the common good by sharing our gifts, talents, and resources with the needy. Nationally, while poorer societies work toward development for the betterment of their citizens, wealthier nations are to help them in this endeavour by sharing equitably with them their greater resources. We could have learned this solidarity long ago from Jesus, the unique Son of God, who taught explicitly that "whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister" (Matt 12:50; see Mark 3:35), but we ignored and ignore him. We could have learned it also from our indigenous sisters and brothers, but we sinfully judged them to be "savages" and ignored them too. Today, we could still learn solidarity from them and from all the Covid caretakers who daily manifest it in their actions. We could also learn from them that our interrelationship as humans and as believers in the one God means that we have obligations to one another, to "practice hospitality ungrudgingly to one another" (1 Peter 4:9), to provide care for one another, to raise one another out of poverty, to provide shelter for the homeless and all those who have been the victim of violence. Solidarity is a concept mysterious to anyone of the me-generation. It is well-known to and highly valued by Popes John Paul II and Francis who both teach that world peace is a work of solidarity.

Solidarity is balanced by another principle, the principle of *subsidiarity* or *participatory justice* that recognizes and respects the autonomy of others to work out their own destiny and steps in to help in that project *only* when it is necessary. We are to work not only for but also with the poor and vulnerable. In 1931, Pope Pius XI taught that "it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and a disturbance of right order to transfer to the larger and higher collectivity functions which can be performed and provided for by lesser and subordinate bodies" (*Quadragesimo Anno*, 79). This teaching applies not only to collectivities or nations but also to individuals of whatever state in life and empowers them to contribute whatever help they can to their neighbors in need. It also confronts, challenges, and seeks to overcome social structures that limit or frustrate these efforts. The principle of subsidiarity excludes any attempt to turn aid into domination over other human beings, what Pope Francis calls "dead stones to be hurled at others" (*Amoris Laetitia*, 49).

This leads us to another Catholic social principle, the *preferential option for the poor*, which John Paul II describes as a "special form

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of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity” (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 42). While all people must be treated with the dignity due to them as equal creatures of the same God, the poor and vulnerable, the economically and socially oppressed, the victims of social and physical violence have a unique and urgent claim to solidarity precisely because of their poverty and vulnerability. This means that we ought to have the poor and oppressed at the centre of our thinking and always have in mind how any of our actions will impact them. Pope Francis points out how easy it is in our modern, me-first world to “look at those who suffer without touching them” (*Fratelli Tutti*, 76). The preferential option for the poor excludes that approach. It offers a different and for many a new perspective, a new way of seeing, one in which we not only help the poor but also embrace them as sisters and brothers. That perspective is validated and strengthened by a final Catholic social principle, *the universal destination of goods*. When God created the earth and its goods, Christians believe, God intended them for the use of ‘adam, that is, all humanity. The Catholic Church consistently teaches that private property is a right, but it equally consistently teaches that the prime goods of life, land, air, water, food, shelter, labour, are created for the benefit of all. The scandalous economic fact that one percent of the world’s richest people owns fifty percent of the world’s financial wealth is a fact that cries out to the creator-God for justice, not for the transformation of the richest into the impoverished but of the impoverished into a more equitable share of the riches God intended for all.

CONCLUSION

We can see no more fitting conclusion to this *see-judge-act* essay than a retelling of Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan that occupies a central place in Pope Francis’ recent encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*. Jesus tells the parable in answer to the question “Who is my neighbour?” (Luke 10:29). A man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho was attacked by robbers who stripped him, beat him, and left him half dead at the side of the road. Along came a priest who saw the wounded man on the road, judged him to be someone beneath his dignity who would threaten his service in the temple and, therefore, not his neighbour. Ignoring the wounded man, he hurried on past and so too did a levite who came along later. Finally, along came a despised and hated Samaritan, who saw the man lying on the road, judged him to be a neighbour in need of help, and acted to bind up his wounds, to bring him to an inn, and to take care of him (v. 34). Having told the parable, Jesus asked “which of these three, do you think, proved neighbour to the man

who fell among the robbers” and got the answer, “the one who showed mercy on him” (vv. 36-7). He then offered an instruction as reason for and conclusion to the parable: “*Go and do likewise*” (v.37). We borrow Jesus’ conclusion as conclusion to our dream of Christians in a time of pandemics: See, Judge, and Act as did the Samaritan.

Reading the Scriptures. Newman’s sermons are suffused with an ardent devotion to Jesus Christ. The most eminent student of his writings in our day – Father Ian Ker – explained using Newman’s own words that his aim had been “to present the person of Christ not in an ‘unreal way – as a mere idea or vision’, but as ‘Scripture has set Him before us in His actual sojourn on earth, in His gestures, words, and deeds’”. For us, perhaps the greatest lesson that we can take from Newman is the encouragement to stay close to Christ in the pages of the Gospels, which he called “the best book of meditations which can be, because it is divine”. By regularly reading the Gospels, we can build up in ourselves that “intimate, immediate dependence on Emmanuel, God with us”, that Newman called “almost the definition of a Christian”.

– KEVIN J. O’REILLY, ed. *Heart Speaks to Heart*. 2021 (Herefordshire: Gracewing Publishing) p.101.