

RELIGION, LAW AND COVID-19 EMERGENCY

"Non in pane solo vivet homo". Catholics in front of Covid-19

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«Non in pane solo vivet homo, sed in omni verbo quod procedit de ore Dei»¹. So Jesus answered to the devil's invitation to turn desert stones into bread, in order to satisfy the hunger that had come after 40 nights and 40 days of fasting; he meant that man lives not only on material nourishment, but above all on spiritual nourishment, especially when facing the desertification of existence and its precariousness. Never as in this time – which seems to flow more slowly in the deafening silence of deserted streets and empty churches, where the sound of sirens takes your breath away while your heart skips a beat – do the faithful deeply miss the proclamation of the "Word that saves" and the act of approaching the real presence of Christ in the sacrament of Eucharist. Never as in this situation is the need for the "Word of God" regarded by Catholics and by the Church as an anchor to cling to in order not to be completely overwhelmed by the tumultuous sea of uncertainty, restlessness, anguish, fear, despair and in order to have still hope of "rebirth". Never as in these convulsive and ruthless days, in which science is divinized in

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¹ Mt. 4, 4 e Lc 4, 4

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the face of the Coronavirus emergency, do the faithful feel hunger, a longing not merely for food, but for peace to be found in the power of prayer, which is the way to "resist" the pandemic and to live the encounter with the transcendent dimension.

Epidemics have been a constant presence in the history of humanity, with a characteristic cyclical trend, to the point of influencing its growth and development². The prayer, the recitation of the Holy Rosary, the act of turning to the patron saints of the great epidemics have helped the faithful feel less lonely and make them perceive the constant presence of Christ in every moment of history³. Popular faith has always turned to special protectors - from Saint Rita to Saint Roque, from Saint Michael the Archangel to Saint Antony abbot, from Saint Cristopher to Saint Sebastian – in order to prevent and fight diseases, by organizing prayers in public form, large processions, long pilgrimages⁴. In 1576, when the plague broke out in Milan, Saint Charles Borromeo opposed the magistrates of the city who wanted to forbid the processions and collective prayers of the faithful. In those dramatic moments, three large processions took place in the city center over three different days, led by the barefoot cardinal and archbishop of the city of Milan, whom the canonization decree defined as «un uomo che, mentre il mondo gli sorride con le maggiori blandizie, vive crocifisso al mondo, vive dello spirito, calpestando le cose terrene, cercando continuamente le celesti, emulo in terra, nei pensieri

² For further information on the topic see I. MELONCELLI – F. MOTTA – S. PIROTTA – G. TREZZI, *Quando le epidemie mietevano a piene mani: lazzaretti, croci devozionali e fopponi disseminati sul nostro territorio*, in *Storia in Martesana*, 11/2018.

³ See A. STAGLIANÒ, *La forza delle nostre preghiere per «contrastare» l'epidemia*, in www.avvenire.it.

⁴ See R. MACCIONI, *I santi da invocare contro l'epidemia*, in www.avvenire.it.

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e nelle opere, della vita degli Angeli»⁵. A few years later, in 1630, the magistrates of Milan asked Cardinal Federico Borromeo, Charles' cousin, to carry the body of Charles Borromeo in a solemn procession through the streets of the city, in order to ward off the threat of the plague. The cardinal accepted the request, although he did not conceal his doubts about the usefulness of such a religious operation, both for reasons of security, related to the risk of increasing the infection, and for reasons of faith, related to the fear that the community might lose its faith in the saint in case of failure⁶.

Whereas Saint Charles Borromeo was convinced that everything was dependent on the great mercy of God, regarded as the beginning and the end of the plague⁷, today those – who say that the coronavirus could be a warning from God and compare it to the plague faced in the XVI century or to the Spanish flu of the last century⁸ - are faced with the position of Cardinal

⁵ See the the canonization bull Unigenitus (1 November 1610) issued by PAUL V, published in R. DE MATTEI, *Come san Carlo Borromeo affrontò l'epidemia del suo tempo*, in <https://www.corrispondenzaromana.it>.

⁶ A. STAGLIANÒ, *La forza delle nostre preghiere...*, cit.

⁷ As he stated: «Città di Milano, la tua grandezza si alzava fino ai cieli, le tue ricchezze si estendevano fino ai confini dell'universo mondo (...) Ecco in un tratto dal Cielo che viene la pestilenza che è la mano di Dio, e in un tratto fu abbassata la tua superbia (...) Egli ha ferito e ha sanato; Egli ha flagellato e ha curato; Egli ha posto mano alla verga del castigo e ha offerto il bastone del sostegno» (CARLO BORROMEIO, *Memoriale al suo diletto popolo della città e diocesi di Milano*, Michele Tini, Roma 1579, pp. 28-29 e p. 81).

⁸ The Spanish flu in 1918 disrupted traditional religious rites, such as funeral and burial rites («per evitare assembramenti è proibito seguire i carri funebri col prete a bordo o far sostare i feretri in chiesa, laddove l'ufficio avviene senza il corpo del defunto ... non più croci, non più preti, non più campane, dritti al cimitero senza passare dalla chiesa. Nell'ottobre del 1918 a Milano trasporti notturni di salme accatastate senza bara», as we can read in A. Guasco, *Vivere ai tempi della spagnola*, in www.associazionepopolari.it). At that time, many believed that the contagion was a sort of new plague of Egypt or an apocalyptic punishment – in any case a divine punishment for the sins of the world. The same thing happens today as regards the coronavirus. Suffice it to mention Father Livio Fanzaga, director of Radio Maria, who claims

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Angelo Scola, according to whom God, while knowing and predicting events, does not determine them. In an interview by Paolo Rodari published in the newspaper “La Repubblica”, the emeritus archbishop of Milan rejected the idea that there could be divine punishment behind the coronavirus, stating that «Dio vuole il nostro bene, ci ama e ci è vicino. Il rapporto con lui è da persona a persona, è un rapporto di libertà (...) Per i cristiani Dio comunica attraverso le circostanze e i rapporti. Anche da questa circostanza potrà emergere un bene per noi. Fra i tanti insegnamenti la necessità di imparare a stare nella paura portandola a un livello razionale»⁹. Cardinal Scola praises the initiatives taken to prevent the infection, although there has not been an unanimous consensus on the preventive suspension of civil and religious ceremonies, including funeral ceremonies, throughout the national territory, enacted by the Italian Bishops’ Conference (IBC) in the context of a relationship of collaboration and alignment to the measures of prevention, containment and contrast adopted by the State lawmaker¹⁰.

that Covid-19 is a divine punishment, triggering the harsh reaction of Father Antonio Spadaro, director of La Civiltà Cattolica, who has tweeted as follows «Nel frattempo c’è povera gente alla quale lupi travestiti da pastori fa credere che la Madonna ha inviato il coronavirus per punire l’umanità. Mentre politici irresponsabili usano la paura del contagio per diffondere il consenso» (in F. GNAGNI, *La Chiesa alla prova del coronavirus (che sbarca in Vaticano)*, in www.formiche.net).

⁹ M. BAZZI, *Dietro il coronavirus non ci sono castighi divini*, in www.ansa.it. The archbishop, aware of the possible spread of the contagion, has forbidden the gathering of people inside closed spaces, while organizing “continuous prayers”: «Sette volte durante il giorno e sette durante la notte, le campane invitavano il popolo alla preghiera e tutti, ovunque si trovassero, dovevano recitare litanie, salmi e invocare la misericordia divina. Carlo Borromeo era mosso anche da ragioni igieniche. Vietando era necessario organizzare messe in autentiche “chiese da campo”» (D. CRIPPA, *Quando la peste infuriava sulla Brianza*, in www.ilgiorno.it).

¹⁰ Decreto “coronavirus”: la posizione della CEI, in www.chiesacattolica.it.

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This suspension – along with the decision to remove blessed water from the stoups, to advise against the gatherings of the faithful, to remove the liturgical leaflets and the hymns, to receive Holy Communion only in the hand¹¹, to recite the Angelus in streaming –has appeared to some not only as an unjustified restriction, but also the expression of a sort of "spiritual impermeability" of the Italian ecclesiastical authorities, who would allegedly renounce their mission¹², without even attempting to try different solutions¹³.

After the declaration of IBC's National Office for Social Communications of 9 March, which referred to an "authentic interpretation" of the government

¹¹ As Father Mauro Leonardi said: «dei cristiani che sentono l'anelito al martirio volendo la Comunione in bocca se il vescovo dice di prenderla in mano, che vogliono abbracciarsi in una messa gremita di gente per scambiarsi il segno della pace, ricordino che martire è colui che offre la propria vita, non quella degli altri: quest'ultimo si chiama kamikaze che vuole uccidere stando in mezzo alla folla» (*Andare a messa durante un'epidemia*, in www.agi.it).

¹² It is Riccardo Cascioli, director of La Nuova Bussola daily, who has accused the bishops to behave, in this circumstance, as "health ministers", providing health advice rather than "care" for souls (cfr. P. FLODER REITTER, *Ora i vescovi si comportano come i ministri della Salute*, in *La Verità*, 9 marzo 2020, p. 13).

¹³ Unlike IBC, the Catholic Church in Poland has decided to increase the number of masses so as to have fewer faithful in each celebration, while imposing the respect of a safety distance (see <https://episkopat.pl/president-of-the-polish-episcopate-the-church-follows-the-recommendations-of-the-health-inspection-service-on-coronavirus>). In Africa, religious and socio-cultural events have been canceled or postponed (see *Coronavirus: des événements religieux également annulés en Afrique*, at www.cath.ch). As happened in 2014 during the Ebola epidemic, religious ceremonies take place having regard to some specific precautions: buckets of water and bleach are placed at the entrance of the places of worship in order to guarantee minimum levels of hygiene; gatherings, pilgrimages and processions are prohibited, and so are the use of blessed water and the sign of peace during Mass; the Eucharist is received exclusively in the hand (see *Coronavirus in Africa: the churches help do not close*, in www.radiomaria.it and *Guinea Bissau, the Church in the field against Ebola*, in www.lastampa.it). Likewise, the Russian Church – which invites to moderation, intensifies hygiene levels and disinfection practices and relies on common sense – allows full participation in the sacraments (see V. ROZANSKIJ, *Russian Orthodox Church: alert on coronavirus, communion, kiss of the icon*, in www.asianews.it).

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provisions as including not only extraordinary ceremonies, but also Sunday Masses, one may wonder whether the ease, with which the Italian Church has seemed to align itself with governmental provisions, may in some way set a dangerous precedent for the *libertas Ecclesiae*¹⁴. Immediately after the decisions taken by the Italian Church, Andrea Riccardi, the founder of the Community of Sant'Egidio – in a comment published in the newspaper “La Stampa” – said he was embittered by a choice grounded on fear and on the Church’s flattening on the secular institutions¹⁵. This position is shared by the historian Alberto Melloni: in the newspaper “La Repubblica”, he has blamed the bishops for a "too much bureaucratic laziness", stressing the need for a truly virtuous and credible clergy¹⁶. Likewise, Enzo Bianchi, the prior of the monastic community of Bose, has wondered on Twitter whether such drastic measures against the possibility to spread the contagion are truly supportive of those who suffer, who are afraid and who seek consolation¹⁷. On the same wave, in the newspaper “La Stampa” the historian Franco Cardini has remarked that, in the past, novenas and processions were organized during epidemics in order to invoke divine protection, while today churches are closed. According to him «Aver reciso il cordone con il sacro ha portato ad

¹⁴ It has been maintained that the mission of the Church is independent of "the historical contingencies in which it lives: it, the Mystical Body of Christ, has been able in every age to conserve and dispense the means necessary for the salvation of the soul, not fearing those who can kill the body (cf. Mt 10:28), but always and only loving the Just Crucified. Abdicating this mission means giving up its primary duty, the comfort and salvation of souls, in the name of an ambiguous and horizontal pseudo-pastoral option, which instead of alleviating the sufferings of the present hour aggravates them with an immanent, reckless, maddening emptiness much more serious and longer harmful to the soul and body"(F. ADERNÒ, *La Messa è finita. La scandalosa rinuncia dei vescovi*, in www.marcotosatti.com).

¹⁵ See F. GNAGNI, *La Chiesa alla prova del coronavirus...*, cit.

¹⁶ See *ibidem*.

¹⁷ See *ibidem*.

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assolutizzare l'individuo e ciò spiega perché ci comportiamo da bambini sciocchi davanti al coronavirus»¹⁸. In the same way, with regard to the closure of the pools of Lourdes in order to protect the safety and health of pilgrims and of the working community of the sanctuary, the historian Roberto de Mattei has stated that «Chi nega il carattere miracoloso dell'acqua di Lourdes, chi teme che le piscine di Lourdes possano produrre contagio, nega il potere di Dio, nega le promesse della Madonna, nega il significato di Lourdes»¹⁹.

Although the complexity of the circumstances can make the Church run the risk of confusing the faithful²⁰, one can try to be a "pilgrim" even without going to a sanctuary; one can be part of a community even from a distance; one can pray even without going to the Church. There are many passages in the Gospel which show how this way to relate to God is envisaged by Christ himself: “Perché dove sono due o tre riuniti nel mio nome, io sono in mezzo a loro” (MT 18, 20); and again “Tu invece, quando preghi, entra nella tua camera e, chiusa la porta, prega il Padre tuo nel segreto; e il Padre tuo, che vede nel segreto, ti ricompenserà” (MT 6, 6). Although the forced limitation of diocesan events due to the health emergency does not allow to live the «dimensione pubblica della fede», the mystical prayer carried out in silence and in solitude continues to give comfort and is enriched, in the digital age, by a new form: this is the prayer made in "community", where one is related to the

¹⁸ “Un tempo contro le epidemie si pregava, oggi si chiudono le chiese”, in www.lastampa.it.

¹⁹ F. BOEZI, *Ecco perché le chiese non devono chiudere*, in www.ilgiornale.it.

²⁰ Suffice it to mention the Decree issued on 12 March by Cardinal De Donatis concerning the closure of all churches in Rome. The day after it was modified by the same cardinal, upon an intervention of the Pope, and the opening of the parish churches was authorized, on the grounds that «every ecclesial precautionary measure must take into account not only the common good of the civil society, but also that unique and precious good that is faith» (*Decree of Cardinal Angelo De Donatis for the diocese of Rome*, in www.diresom.net).

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other one even if at a distance and the link with the sacred is intensified; it is the prayer made "in connection", "on the net", where online groups that recall the importance of faith are organized. The IBC itself has launched a new digital platform containing news and reflections that help to live this difficult moment, giving the possibility to download texts – updated and enriched weekly – to "celebrate and pray in times of epidemic". It is emphasized that the impossibility to carry out celebrations in the assembly context does not mean the impossibility to enter into communion with God²¹. The Holy Masses, in fact, continue to be celebrated regularly without the convocation and participation of the assembly, and the Eucharistic Sacrifice continues «ad essere offerto per tutta la Chiesa, con la possibilità dei fedeli di unirsi spiritualmente nell'orazione e di sostare in adorazione dinnanzi al tabernacolo nelle chiese, che continueranno a rimanere aperte»²².

The bishop of Lecce, monsignor Michele Seccia, has decided to compose and send a prayer to all the priests on the difficult moment we are going through. The prayer has been sent in paper and via the web to all the priests, who in turn are to spread it amongst the faithful of their own communities, along with the invitation to recite family prayers every day, in order to obtain the liberation from the virus through the intercession of the Virgin Mary and the patron saint Oronzo who, in the past, had already saved the city of Lecce

²¹ It is advised to use these texts along with with the Liturgy of the Hours, which may be downloaded for free from the ad hoc app containing both the texts and the audio files (see CEI, *Sussidio per celebrare e pregare in tempo di epidemia*, in <https://chiciseparera.chiesacattolica.it>)

²² «Vuolsi pregare ma non tentare Iddio»: la fede ai tempi del colera, in www.breviuarum.eu. The Italian Government and the Ministry of Health have confirmed the possibility for the faithful to attend a place of worship for individual prayer, regardless of the suspension of religious ceremonies (in www.diresom.net).

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from the plague²³. Due to the emergency that the country is experiencing, the “Rinnovamento nello Spirito” has also launched a national campaign to pray the Holy Spirit, inviting everyone to pray the rosary in their own homes every Thursday, starting from 27 February, in the time slot that goes from 19 to 23, by placing a light next to the window, or on the balcony, or yet outside the door, so that the prayer «guarisca coloro che sono nella sofferenza, ispiri la scienza ai medici e la sapienza ai governanti, infonda coraggio a tutti coloro che sono nello sconforto e nella paura»²⁴.

On 11 March Angelo De Donatis, the cardinal vicar for the diocese of Rome, established a day of prayer, fasting and solidarity with the sick and with those working for them in Italy and in the world. Through the listening to the word of God and the rediscovery of what is essential in these days of desperate and anguishing silence, one is invited «a vivere con la forza della fede, la certezza della speranza, la gioia della carità, il gusto della preghiera»²⁵. In fact, as the cardinal has said, «Si sperimenta la forza della preghiera quando siamo consapevoli delle nostre debolezze, delle nostre fragilità, del senso di smarrimento che avvertiamo davanti all'imprevisto e all'ignoto»²⁶. This is the same reflection that can be found in the words of Julián Carrón, president of “Fraternità di Comunione e Liberazione”; in a letter sent to Luciano Fontana, the director of the newspaper “Corriere della Sera”, he has stressed that «il nemico con cui ci troviamo a combattere non è appena il coronavirus, ma la

²³ See *Coronavirus Covid-19: Lecce, mons. Seccia invia alle famiglie della diocesi una preghiera per la protezione dalle malattie*, in www.agensir.it.

²⁴ A. DE DONATIS, *Coronavirus Covid-19: RnS, al via da giovedì una Campagna di preghiera allo Spirito Santo*, in www.agensir.it.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ *Coronavirus: una giornata di preghiera e digiuno per chiedere l'aiuto del Signore*, in www.vaticannews.it.

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paura»²⁷: this is a fear which we are not always able to deal with rationally and against which it is not easy to develop antibodies²⁸.

In these weeks, the planetary interconnection makes us experience a paradoxical condition: the more connected we are, the more the contact becomes "contagion" and communication turns into "contamination"²⁹. We find ourselves fragile, vulnerable, insecure, precarious, "human"; the boundaries that previously stretched beyond the horizon now shrink inexorably to the point of closing us within the domestic walls³⁰. The "virus fear" accompanies a daily life where we struggle to glimpse a foreshortening of the future and are crushed by the weight of impotence. At this juncture, in which unprecedented scenarios are the background of our days, it is necessary, albeit not simple, to feel this experience not as a privation, but as an opportunity to discover new ways to relate to each other and between us and

²⁷ The text can be found in F. GNAGNI, *La Chiesa alla prova del coronavirus...*, cit.

²⁸ Suffice it to mention the young people "fleeing" from the red areas of northern Italy to the more "reassuring" southern regions of Italy when the "closure" of Lombardy was announced – a situation closely resembling Manzoni's description: «Sono partiti prima della mezzanotte. Nonostante le grida che proibivano di lasciare la città e minacciavano le solite pene severissime, come la confisca delle case e di tutti i patrimoni, furono molti i nobili che fuggirono da Milano per andarsi a rifugiare nei loro possedimenti in campagna» (A. MANZONI, *I promessi sposi*, cap. XVI).

²⁹ See A. SPADARO, *La politica del coronavirus: attivare gli anticorpi cattolici*, in www.avvenire.it.

³⁰ «La preghiera», Pope Francis tells us from the virtual pages of the online press, «ci fa capire la nostra vulnerabilità. È il grido dei poveri, di quelli che stanno affondando, che si sentono nel pericolo, soli. E in una situazione difficile, disperata, è importante sapere che c'è il Signore a cui aggrapparsi» (in www.lastampa.it).

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God³¹. Therefore the Church reiterates the following message to its people: the absence of celebrations and liturgies can be a sign of pastoral responsibility and discernment, and not of giving up faith; all must comply with the envisaged rules of conduct to avoid the spread of the infection; the care for souls is the mission of priests, who must continue to accompany, support, assist and comfort the exhausted people of the faithful³²; the word of God may also be listened to through a proclamation having a digital dimension; hope can have the voice of prayer, even of that made in solitude, although this is not a substitute for the sacrament of Holy Eucharist³³. We remain in wait of

³¹ As stressed by Cardinal Peter Turkson, Prefect of the Department of Integral Human Development, God can be prayed «perché accresca la nostra fede, aiuti gli ammalati nella guarigione e sostenga gli operatori sanitari nella loro missione (...) imparando a non stigmatizzare il “malato” (...) a coltivare la “Sapienza del cuore” come atteggiamento di sa aprirsi alla sofferenza dei fratelli e riconosce in essi l’immagine di Dio (...) Così, possiamo affermare, come Giobbe, “Io ero gli occhi per il cieco, ero i piedi per lo zoppo”» (P. K. A. TURKSON, *Rafforzare solidarietà e amicizia nel tempo del coronavirus*, in www.vaticannews.it).

³² In the *Angelus* of 15 March, Pope Francis addressed his thanks to the priests who, in these situations «pensano mille modi di essere vicino al popolo, perché il popolo non si senta abbandonato; sacerdoti con lo zelo apostolico, che hanno capito bene che in tempi di pandemia non si deve fare il “don Abbondio”» (FRANCESCO, *Angelus*, 15 marzo 2020, in www.vatican.va). The Press Office of the Holy See communicated that the Pope visited the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in the afternoon of the same day, «per rivolgere una preghiera alla Vergine, *Salus populi Romani* (...) facendo un tratto di Via del Corso a piedi, come in pellegrinaggio, il Santo Padre ha raggiunto la chiesa di San Marcello al Corso, dove si trova il Crocifisso miracoloso che nel 1522 venne portato in processione per i quartieri della città perché finisse la ‘Grande Peste’ a Roma. Con la sua preghiera, il Santo Padre ha invocato la fine della pandemia che colpisce l’Italia e il mondo, implorato la guarigione per i tanti malati, ricordato le tante vittime di questi giorni, e chiesto che i loro familiari e amici trovino consolazione e conforto.» (M. BRUNI, *Francesco: a Santa Maria Maggiore e San Marcello al Corso per “invocare la fine della pandemia che colpisce l’Italia e il mondo”*, in www.agensir.it).

³³ At this regard, after the *Angelus* of 15 March, the Pontiff stated that: «In questa situazione di pandemia, nella quale ci troviamo a vivere più o meno isolati, siamo invitati a riscoprire e approfondire il valore della comunione che unisce tutti i membri della Chiesa. Uniti a Cristo non siamo mai soli, ma formiamo un unico Corpo, di cui Lui è il Capo. È un’unione che si

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an appropriate reflection and solution provided soon by the pontifical magisterium to the problem of the Eucharistic fast that we are experiencing.

alimenta con la preghiera, e anche con la comunione spirituale all'Eucaristia, una pratica molto raccomandata quando non è possibile ricevere il Sacramento» (*ibidem*).