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COVID-19 AND THE CALL TO SANITIZE HUMAN CONSCIENCE

A quick glance at the harsh realities of the start and the rampant spread of Covid-19 and its impact on human life, existence and relationships demonstrates how we can become helpless and clueless in front an invisible and tiny speck of nature in the form of a virus. In recent years, we have witnessed a spectacular technological revolution, which has turned the planet into a *global village* with the diffusion of news and information with lightning speed, and rapid movements from one place to the other with ease and comfort. The unprecedented and rapid economic growth has led to the better nutrition, enhanced life-style, advanced healthcare system, expansion of employment opportunities, housing and clothing, and doubling of prosperity on multiple fronts. With the same rapidity, Covid-19 has affected almost every corner of the world demonstrating the “interconnection” (cf. Francis, 2015, nn. 70, 117) and “interrelatedness” (ibidem nn. 92, 120, 137) of all living beings, and also a clear link between human and planetary health. A common pivotal factor for the intensity and velocity of contagion has been the human connectivity with fellow human beings amidst socio-cultural and religious meetings, gatherings, feasts and festivals. The negligence in keeping oneself safe by not following the prescribed precautionary measures, such as, regular washing of the hands, using sanitizers, wearing masks whenever and wherever necessary, and maintaining social distancing, has been instrumental in the rapid and rampant spread of Covid-19.

No doubt, Covid-19 has paralyzed the entire human community by causing an unprecedented and extraordinary health crisis, innumerable deaths, anni-

hilation of economy and social security, loss of employment and job opportunities, upsurge in poverty, misery and despair across the globe. It has enveloped us in a situation of uncertainty, insecurity, claustrophobia, despair and sadness, depriving us of the “exuberance of hugs, the kindness of handshakes, affection of kisses, and has transformed relationships into fearful interactions between strangers” (Pontificia Accademica, 2020, p. 1)¹. However, the global response has demonstrated the human ability to struggle, collaborate and work together as one community to resolve the issues that challenge and threaten the integral well-being of the entire humanity. It has also taught a great lesson to us that by focusing collectively on our planetary health, we can ensure that we are better prepared for the next inevitable health crisis in the future. Such hope founded on mutual support and collaboration is enunciated by Pope Francis in his ground-breaking Encyclical *Laudato si'*, “The Creator does not abandon us; he never forsakes his loving plan or repents of having created us. Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home” (Francis, 2015, n. 13). We need to work for all-inclusive and sustainable relationship and development for a harmonious coexistence not only with our fellow human beings, but also with the myriad and diverse living creatures all around us.

Definitely, the trajectory of the pandemic has become extremely difficult to gauge and predict because of the mutation of the virus into new and more lethal variants. As a highly contagious pandemic, it has spread in rampant manner by surpassing all boundaries and making no distinction based on nationality, race, religion or ideology, and has planted several serious, deep-rooted and uncomfortable questions, “Have the various anthropogenic activities disturbed the ecological diversity and balance, and damaged the natural ecosystems by polluting land, air, water, and all that is on the face of the earth? Is Covid-19 nature’s wrath and warning for human greed and pride, which have accelerated «huge consumption on the part of some rich countries»” (ibidem, n. 51)? Such greed always leaves behind “great human and environmental liabilities such as unemployment, abandoned towns, the depletion of natural reserves, deforestation, the impoverishment of agriculture and local stock breeding, open pits, riven hills, polluted rivers” (ibidem, n. 5).

In contrast to the insatiable human greed to exploit all natural resources unscrupulously, nature has always favored and promoted the diversity and co-existence of innumerable visible and non-visible species by providing suitable environment and conditions to all living beings. However, due to the unbridled

1 Translation is mine.

anthropogenic activities to overexploit the natural resources in the name of development coupled with *homo-centric* environmental approach, we are facing unprecedented threats to human health, survival and continuity. What is needed today is the eco-centric worldview which asserts that the earth is *Our Common Home* for the integral wellbeing, survival, and continuity of all living beings on the face of the earth. Apart from that an eco-centric spirituality could mould healthy and positive attitude and behavior toward all forms of life in nature, because “the violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life” (LS 2). While focusing on the lasting impact of Covid-19 on human instinct of being the master and lord over everything that exists on the face of earth, we will discuss on some salient features of deep-rooted human longing for interconnected relationships with all forms of life in nature, which is taking new forms in a fast-changing scenario marked with uncertainty, inquietude, and fear.

1. FRUITION OF INTERCONNECTEDNESS IN COVID-19 ERA

By nature, humans are social and dialogical beings, whose most fundamental and deep-rooted desire is to establish, nurture, and grow in relationships, which is also essential of the integral human development. Such important human characteristic was brought out emphatically by Pope Francis in his ground-breaking Encyclical *Laudato si'*. It is to be noted that John Paul II presented the ecological crisis as a moral crisis, “Certain elements of today’s ecological crisis reveal its moral character. [...] The most profound and serious indication of the moral implications underlying the ecological problem is the lack of *respect for life* evident in many of the patterns of environmental pollution” (John Paul II, 1990, n. 6-7). Benedict XVI linked the moral cause of the environmental crisis primarily to a culture of relativism, drew the attention on the neo-paganism or to a new pantheism, which viewed nature as something more important than the human person, and defined a connection between and ecology of the environment and human ecology, “The book of nature is one and indivisible: it takes in not only the environment but also life, sexuality, marriage, the family, social relations: in a word, integral human development. Our duties towards the environment are linked to our duties towards the human person, considered in himself and in relation to others” (Benedict XVI, 2009, n. 51). Pope Francis terms ecological crisis as the ruptured human relationships with God, with one another and with nature. He strongly emphasizes that “everything is interconnected”, “everything is connected”, and “everything is intimately interrelated” (Francis, 2015, nn. 70,

117, 137). Then he makes a powerful observation, “If everything is connected, it is hard to imagine that this global disaster is unrelated to our way of approaching reality, our claim to be absolute masters of our own lives and of all that exists” (Francis, 2020a, nn. 34).

In a positive note, the Covid-19 outbreak articulates in a vivid and profound manner that the entire humanity is a closely tied community with a shared future, and only as one community, we can collaborate in communion with one another to tackle various challenges and crises that threaten the integral human wellbeing and that of *Our Common Home*. Although there were no concrete answers to the end of the current uncertain situation, the vaccination drives to counter Covid-19 in different corners of the world has kept united the entire humanity in acknowledging and applauding every single effort of doctors and virologists. An all-round spirit of appreciation and gratitude to the medical personnel who are assiduously taking care of the persons affected by Covid-19 is another factor which has sustained and kept alive the universal brotherhood, collaboration and hope for a better future.

One of our famous Marian hymns says, “No one can live as an island”, which reflects a Seventh Century scintillating poem written by John Donne, “No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main [...]; any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee” (Donne, 1923, p. 98; Donne, 1995, p. 1). Definitely, we cannot live without relating to our fellow human beings and surrounding ambience. *Our Common Home* provides us with “a fundamental conduit for relationship” (Francis, 2015, n. 67), which is built on interpersonal contact and interactions. Covid-19 has forced us to observe social distancing, which is actually physical distancing, as a new mode of relating and being in touch with one another to stay safe and healthy, and a new approach of interaction with fellow human beings without having physical contacts. By forcing us to stay at home during Lockdown, Covid-19 has taught us the deeper meaning of inter-human connectedness within families and various communities. A notable number of cases of separations and divorce was reported from different parts of the world during the Lockdown because of claustrophobia, financial insecurity, uncertainty, and the combination of economic as well as social stress without having any possibility of meeting or interacting with friends and relatives. Taking note of the dramatic increase in the cases of violence against women and girls, António Guterres, UN Secretary-General, had made an earnest appeal to focus on the shared struggle to overcome the virus, and pointed out that violence was not confined to the battlefield, “for many women and girls, the threat looms largest where they should be safest: in their own homes” (Un News, 2020).

The contemporary rapid advances in science and technology, particularly in communication technology, has turned the world to a global village resulting into enormous increase in interconnectedness, which points to the relational dimension of every human person. “It is through relationships that we move forward toward full human growth and development. Without relationships we cannot ‘become’. To be totally devoid of relationships, to be completely shut off, to be totally isolated runs contrary to human need and health – it is to frustrate the fundamental truth of being human” (Devine, 2000, p. 17). Indeed, human life flourishes and reaches its fullness in communion with others in a harmonious relationship with other forms of life. As social and dialogical beings, our life does not belong only to each one of us, but also “to family members, friends, the community. [...] Every time someone dies, an entire world disappears and is lost forever” (Bodei, 2010, p. 57)². Life-threatening global crisis has brought us all closer to reconnect with ourselves and with the loved ones. Many families discovered the joy of being together as one family by dedicating more time to parents and children, which was not possible for many families because of work and various other responsibilities. There was more time to be with oneself, and in the acute absence of socio-cultural, religious gatherings and celebrations, deeper inter-personal relationships within families, and extra-personal relationships outside families via social networks sprouted and flourished on a rather different level, and demonstrated that “human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself” (Francis, 2015, n. 66). The inner longing of going out in the open also instilled in us the value of being in touch with the natural world. Indeed, what is demanded of us now is a “more profound development in our sense of relatedness to the natural world” (Berry, 2009, p. 45). All of us have the time now to shift the focus, look deeper, reflect on ourselves, and become a better person that we were yesterday. In short, all of us should become optimistic persons who look at the bright side of life and realize the opportunity to be happy in the grief, uncertainty, fear and disruption.

2. REJUVENATED HUMANE SPIRIT NURTURED BY FAITH

In 1347-1349, the Black Death swept across and ravaged Europe killing approximately 25 million people. For those who experienced it, “the disease seems to have come from nowhere and in many places, like Florence and Ven-

² Translation is mine.

ice, it wiped out half the population in a few weeks. Clerical sermons at the time interpreted the plague as a punishment from God” (McDonagh, 2004, pp. 67-68). The outbreak of highly contagious Covid-19 exposed human vulnerability, helplessness and societal deficiencies and forced us to ask the same questions whether the pandemic is a punishment from God. Whether the pandemic is to be understood as punishments “depends upon a whole network of concepts and issues. Is God someone who punishes people, or is he too transcendent to take this kind of interest in his creation?” (Reichengach, Anderson, 1995, p. 333). However, the pandemic forced us to look for an answer by turning to God. Unfortunately, the doors of the Churches remained closed during the partial and complete Lockdown. In search for the ways and means to fill the void, the community of faithful devised their own methods to live, practice and maintain their faith in times of crisis, and to be in touch with one another to support, console and to keep hope alive against all odds of overcoming the difficult and uncertain situation. Indeed, the edifice of the Churches were closed, but the Church as faith community became very much alive and active in people’s life, animated and guided by the families or group of families, thus, vivified the concept of a Church which “goes forth” from four walls to the people and to the periphery, “Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of us are asked to obey his call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the ‘peripheries’ in need of the light of the Gospel” (Francis, 2013, n. 24). Such new ways of coming together to live and practice their faith indicates that in the post-pandemic era, not only a new social order might emerge, but also a new faith community might take root in the life of the Church.

The rejuvenated faith in a crisis situation of fear and uncertainty caused by Covid-19 has also paved the way to discover the deeper meaning of suffering, pain and grief. No doubt, such situations often lead us into the abyss of nothingness, helplessness and hopelessness; but they also help us to discover the value of our vast reservoirs of resiliency and endurance in communion with one another in the spirit of being closely interconnected and interdependent. Fixing our gaze on the person of Jesus Christ, who wept at the death of one of his friends Lazarus (Jn 11:35), fills us with the hope of a new humanity, “a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev 21:1). On 27 March 2020, an extraordinary moment of prayer was presided over by Pope Francis, who enunciated the urgency of fixing our gaze on Jesus Christ:

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 (Francis, 2020b).

The Covid-19 pandemic reveals that everything is life is a symphony, where every single person and every single life matters, and is taken care of by the One who is the Source and Sustenance of every life, "Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?" (Mt 6:26). In pursuit of wealth and prosperity, often the integral well-being of the entire humanity is kept aside. Now, the realization is gradually dawning that the integral well-being of every individual is indispensable; because in the end what matters most is human life. The crisis situation has become a great teacher to be more humane, attentive to the needs of our fellow human beings without asking "who is my neighbor?" (Lk 10:29), and inspired us to be cheerful givers by showing that there is no limit to help. No doubt, as long as any help is extended with warm and sincere hearts, it brings out the beauty of being more humane nurtured by faith. Search for meaning in life amidst uncertainty and despair, when we all cry to the Lord like the Disciple, "We are perishing", it is highly imperative for each one of us that we become part of the solution by placing our trust and hope fully on Jesus Christ rather than the problem. Faith in Jesus Christ is the most powerful weapon to fight against hopelessness and despair, which helps us to see that all our thoughts, words and actions in three-fold paradigm of "seeing, judging and acting", should be constructive, helpful for shaping a better social environment conducive to the emergence of more humane society.

3. CORONA AND DOMINANT TECHNOCRATIC PARADIGM

The Corona virus has been spreading terror and creating havoc in every spectrum of human life. Ironically, corona in Italian language signifies the crown, which is the symbol of power, prestige and ego-centric attitude. The Book of Psalm

says, “what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet” (Ps 8:4-6). As the crown of God’s creation, we have often depended heavily on human intelligence, science and technology to solve all existential problems and challenges; however, “our immense technological development has not been accompanied by a development in human responsibility, values and conscience” (Francis, 2015, n. 105), because “Science and technology are what we can do; morality is what we agree we should or should not do” (Wilson, 2001, p. 130). The dominant technocratic paradigm has made us feel that we too can become like God (Gen 3:5); but Covid-19 has demonstrated human vulnerability and helplessness in front of the unfathomable nature’s grandeur and power. No doubt, the incredible development in science and technology “has succeeded in multiplying occasions of pleasure, yet has found it very difficult to engender joy” (Francis, 2013, n. 7). Several months of lockdown in almost every part of *Our Common Home* exposed the limits to our dependence on human power and intelligence; and demonstrated the acute need and value of collaboration and interdependence.

We cannot negate the contribution of the communication technology in times of dire need of being in touch with one another after being forced to stay at home or apart in islands of self or common isolation as a group or a family. During the Lockdown, when everyone and everything seemed to be at a halt gripped with fear, solitude and uncertainty, the Internet-induced social media became a handy, effective and speedy tool of communication, information and education. The timely advent of cloud meeting platforms, such as, Zoom, Google Meet, Moodle, etc., were a great boon to stay connected even while being physically separated. However, because of rampant misinformation, disinformation and fake news, the social media created also infodemic, which often seemed to be more dangerous than the pandemic itself. A plethora of misinformation and fake news surfacing regularly online and offline created more confusion, desperation, frustration, insomnia, anxiety, and irritation rather than helping people to stay calm and safe in such a critical time.

No doubt, the spectacular ever-growing scientific and technological development and new inventions have facilitated human life with improved medicines, medical interventions and cure for many incurable diseases. They have provided human being with highly advanced means and experiments to gain control over certain aspects of birth, growth, sickness and bodily death; which ultimately helped them to inculcate the sense of being the crown of the creation. However, the sense of

being on the top of creation, increasing human dependency on science and technology, and a never-ending mad-rush for “more and better” resulted into the rampant overexploitation of the natural resources, deforestation, and pollution of land, water and air, which further aggravated the extinction of species, loss of biodiversity and climate change. Covid-19 has demonstrated the danger of technocratic paradigm, and reinstated to a certain extent the urgency of a harmonious and interdependent existence of all living beings with all that exists of the face of the earth.

4. UNMASKING AND SANITIZING HUMAN GREED AND PRIDE

Covid-19 has forced us to use masks and sanitizers to save ourselves from being infected. The fear of contagion has filled us with fear and suspicion of the persons while we are out in public places. The Gospel according to Matthew says, “It is not what enters into the mouth that defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man” (Mt 15:11). Unfortunately, we are desperately facing a paradox. Both what comes out of the mouth and what enters into the mouth have become the cause of defilement or contagion. By using masks and sanitizers, we are trying to protect ourselves from the droplets coming out from the other person’s mouth and nose; and to prevent them from entering into our bodies.

In the case of Covid-19 and the planetary health, what is needed more urgently is unmasking ourselves interiorly and let out the viruses of egocentric attitude, narcissism, greed, pride, unquenchable thirst for more and better, and the “globalization of indifference” (ibidem, n. 54), which closes our eyes and deafens our ears not “to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*” (Francis, 2015, n. 49). Unmasking and sanitizing human greed and pride also means the call and challenge to bring a radical change to our life style. Pope Francis substantiates vividly the call to change, “The pain, uncertainty and fear, and the realization of our own limitations, brought on by the pandemic have only made it all the more urgent that we rethink our styles of life, our relationships, the organization of our societies and, above all, the meaning of our existence”(Francis, 2020a, n. 33). Apart from that we need to sanitize our conscience – purify our attitudes and behaviour towards our fellow human beings and *Our Common Home*. Human community can guarantee its continuity and prosperity only by sanitizing itself from invading continuously and relentlessly the natural habitats and by abandoning the habit of devouring everything that exists on the face of the earth including “pangolins and bats”.

Unfortunately, more than often in many cases, we tend to mask our eyes in front of the plight of the poor and sanitize ourselves from our duty and respon-

sibility toward them. In the context of India, some cases of discrimination against the poor and the marginalized were all but evident in current crisis situation as it was noted clearly, “the concept of social distancing slowly inches towards discrimination and at one point the line between them obliterates” (Mukherjee, 2020, p. 35). The images of a huge number of migrant labourers in India walking thousands of miles from the metropolitan cities to their respective hometowns because of the sudden imposition of Lockdown in April 2020 will never be deleted from the Indian mind-set. We cannot pretend to mask our mouth and be silent in front of dire need of safety measures for poor, disadvantaged and weaker sections of the society, because hunger can more people than the pandemic itself. The poor are more vulnerable to chronic diseases because of material deprivation, unhealthy living conditions and limited access to healthcare facilities. The explosion of Covid-19 cases in a country like India reveals that if only Government had invested more in public health care system, frightening number of deaths could have been prevented or reduced. While a significant number of the population remained indoors respecting the lockdown and saving lives, while honing culinary skills, online games, social networking, and exploring the possibilities of work from home, an average Indian family with many children, especially in a single room set-up in slums, forced to stay at home with no luxury or basic amenities to maintain social distancing. Such situation challenges us to unmask ourselves and to sanitize our conscience to be able to hear “*both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*”(Francis, 2015, n. 49).

5. HOPE FOR A BETTER FUTURE

The Covid-19 experiences have taught us some precious lessons to enhance the concept of communion and community with a shared future for the entire humanity in *Our Common Home*. Amidst the claustrophobia and continued uncertainty, a “sanitized” humanitarian spirit has evolved to work together for a better future. A strong realization has crept into our conviction that standing closely together in the spirit of collaboration and mutual support and leaving aside socio-political differences to overcome the most difficult and adverse situations are more than mere imperatives; they are part and parcel of nurturing interdependent and interconnected relationships for human wellbeing, survival, continuity, and prosperity. The world will become a safer place when the entire humanity is safe; and all of us will remain healthier if the healthy issues of every individual is addressed adequately. No doubt, Covid-19 has brought questions upon “science, technology, medical infrastructure, economy, international

law, international relations, and human life amongst others” (Mukherjee, 2020, p. 37). These questions are yet to be resolved; however all-out serious and relentless global efforts to find a solution in the form of vaccine keeps human hope alive to keep going despite uncertainties and fear of many more invisible enemies, which might appear in all probability in the future.

If we continue to destroy the natural habitats, we cannot overrule new pandemics in near future. The way the forests in Amazon Region and in the other parts of the world are being cleared, it is feared that new and mutated viruses might escape from there and find a new host in human beings. Definitely, we can hope to develop drugs and vaccines and enhance health care infrastructures to combat diseases and pandemics, but such hope has to be sustained by our common efforts to stop unsustainable anthropogenic activities. Otherwise, we might become victims of even more lethal disaster in the form of the irreversible climate change that will have no medicine or vaccine. The hope of a better future is enunciated in a perfect manner in *Laudato si'* by Pope Francis, “Let us sing as we go. May our struggles and our concern for this planet never take away the joy of our hope” (Francis, 2015, n. 244).

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SUMMARY

Amidst the unprecedented health crisis, annihilation of economy and social security, and upsurge in the loss of job opportunities caused by Covid-19, the emergence of a dynamic global spirit of collaboration has reinvigorated the human ability to work together to respond collectively to any peril that threatens the integral well-being of the entire humanity. The precautionary measures of washing our hands regularly, sanitizing oneself, using masks and maintaining social distances have rendered new meaning to human relationships. Apart from highlighting danger of dominant technocratic paradigm, the pandemic has also called for the sanitization of our conscience and unmask oneself to let the viruses of egocentric attitude, narcissism, greed, pride and unquenchable thirst for more and better which ultimately leads to the unbridled exploitation of the natural resources. Only a radical change in our life-style, which takes care of the basic needs, hopes, and aspirations of all forms of life, could reinforce and guarantee a better future.

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