

COVID-19—and You

What do you think of clergy who lived through the bubonic plague and never addressed it pastorally with their people? We are precisely in that situation today with ministry in "the Coronavirus era"—the pandemic, perhaps the worst disaster to have befallen humanity since the Great Plague of 1347 to 1350, where close to one-third of the population perished. A third of the world came down with the Spanish Flu a hundred years ago, with 675,000 in the United States. The last one to hit the U. S. was the HIV epidemic.

Mother Teresa, who established an AIDS hospice in New York City and an AIDS home in San Francisco, believes that "God is speaking to us through this disease." What might God be saying?

The Church has always called on its members to "love one another," to love "because God first loved us." Indeed the marvel of the ancient world was, "Look how these Christians love one another." When the doctors fled Rome during an epidemic, the Christians went in and risked their lives and health. This was noted by the survivors who then became Christian.

But these words sometimes seem to promise a reward, a benefit for all this loving behavior. Not anything tangible, of course, but the joy of knowing we are responding rightly to our fellow creatures, a kind of soul-satisfying fullness of spirit. While all this is true, we often forget to warn our congregations of love's darker side—a side which, when experienced, can stun and shatter us with its unexpected force. Love's power to wound, to injure both those giving and receiving love, is more than a result of broken romances—it is an enduring theological issue for the church.

The wounding power of love has always been a part of the church's memory—recall the many meditations on the Five Wounds of Christ. Yet today's Church stumbles on the new crisis, which joins love and suffering together so vividly: the pandemic. Even as the Son of God came down to earth, became human, loved, and cared for us, tending us like the "good shepherd," Jesus "caught death" from us, suffering and dying because he risked the vulnerability of love.

When the church loses sight of its own genetic heritage of wounding love, it becomes just one more modern institution trying to decide how to handle the crisis. The church must be able to do more than post brochures on using soap and nervously do away with signs of peace and restrict communion. It is time for Christianity to get Christian; it is time for our churches to discover Christ. Without a basis in faith, the church can move no further along than human institutions.

The Church should be on the front lines of the COVID-19 battle. We must step forward to educate and inform about it and its prevention while realizing that any disease that makes us look into the abyss of uncertainty, and perhaps even death is bound to make people nervous and fearful. Thus we must fall back on our historic ability to find God's compassion and our salvation, on the other side of love's wounding power.

The fact that you may have already heard about the topic from the pulpit does not mean that now everything is over, and you can dispense with the issue. The pandemic represents the perennial issues of aiding people regardless of who or where they come from, of taking risks for God, of transcending barriers for the sake of the gospel. COVID-19 is not just a medical problem; it is a vital societal problem. This "molecular equivalent of the nuclear bomb," must be matched by an ecclesiastical equivalent of the peace movement—an epidemic of disease must be met by an "epidemic of compassion."

As Pastoral Theologian Snow says: "This is one of those things, those rare things met seldom in life, which one must either get to the heart of, dive into the middle of, or ignore completely. You can't flirt with it, fool with it, be clever about it. Either you have to pretend that it is not there, or else that if it is there, it has nothing to do with you—or you have to choose to address it seriously, and then only after you have let it speak to your own undefended heart"

What is so frightening about this? The worse that can happen is that we can die horribly. The same thing every service member is aware of when they take their oath to defend their Country. The second worse thing is that we can become disabled. Working here at the Veterans' Administration, I know that neither of these things is the worse thing. The worst thing is death, followed by Hell. I will always remember what a spinal injured victim in a VA told me. He was an alcoholic. He was crossing a bridge coming from a liquor store with a bottle in a bag from which he was carrying, and he had a bottle in two of his pockets. A group of young (I am having trouble finding the word, they weren't in the gang yet) came up to him and started roughing him up. Seeing a police car, they threw him over a bridge. He didn't hit the water; he hit a sidewalk and broke practically every bone in his body, including sections of his spine. He was brought to the VA and months upon months of surgeries, physical, spiritual and mental therapies he returned to a home, where he has assistance in ADLs (Activities of Daily Living like dressing, eating and toileting). He is supporting himself not on Social Security Disability but making a living as a motivational speaker. What doesn't defeat us makes us stronger, as we say in the Military.

This is why our doctors, nurses, and staff who rush in like soldiers do in a battle, to fight the war against disease and will be fighting COVID-19. They illustrate the greatest of Christian values, and they may not be Christian. But as Jesus says in Matthew 25, when we visit the sick, we visit Christ. We will then be welcomed into the Kingdom of heaven.

We also know that the moment of our death and how it occurs is in God's hands. If God doesn't want us to die, we won't. If God knows that suffering is good for us, we will suffer. God loves us and sometimes uses tough love so that we can die and rise to new life with him in heaven. That is the best that can happen.

Fr Jonathan Morse