

FORMATION AND THE COVID PANDEMIC

Formation is concerned with the way the experiences of life teach us, change us and help us to be more conformed to Jesus. Of course, we must also acknowledge that some experiences can harm and diminish us. In religious life, we rely on the help of God to learn from everything that happens to us and we hope to grow in faith and love even through the painful experiences that at first seem to crush us. The work of initial formation is precisely directed at this kind of learning. How can a young person continue to mature, grow, learn from all that happens to him interiorly, in the community, with others, in the apostolate, in his studies etc.? To acquire the skill to appropriate what is helpful from our experiences and to internalize the professed values of the Christian and religious life is a lifelong process for all of us. The Covid 19 pandemic has been a privileged time of learning for those who were able to live it with faith, hope and love.

A World Plunged into Crisis

The Covid 19 pandemic took the world by surprise and caused one of the deadliest health crises ever. Every part of the world was affected. Tens of millions of people were struck down with serious illness and more than 3 million people died worldwide. Nothing like it has been seen since the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918.

We live in a highly sophisticated technological age marked by huge advances in science, technology, and medical expertise. Despite all these remarkable advances, the pandemic struck and raged beyond our control for almost a year. The world was faced with a deadly threat that it could not handle.

The pandemic was an act of nature that shows us how little we really understand and appreciate the mysteries of nature and the vulnerability of human beings. It is also one more manifestation of the harmful relationship between humans and the rest of nature that has given rise



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to the present ecological crisis that is threatening all life on the planet. It is clear that despite all our scientific and medical knowledge, the world was ill prepared for this pandemic and continues to struggle to overcome it.

The pandemic made its way into the most personal and sacred parts of our existence. Family life, work, school, health, relationships, travel, the economy, entertainment, sports, religious practice were all adversely affected. Businesses closed and many people lost their jobs. There was nowhere to run for refuge; even the Churches were closed. Never before was the entire world united to such an extent by a crisis.

In this short reflection, I want to consider the kinds of response made to the pandemic. In the beginning, most people thought of the Corona Virus as something that originated in China and that would stay there. It was the Chinese virus and the Chinese were responsible for it. As long as that attitude prevailed, there was no possibility of an adequate response from the rest of the world. There was also a tendency to underestimate the nature of the virus and to insist it was just like the annual 'flu and could be dealt with in a similar way. Once again, as long as that attitude prevailed thousands of people were being infected and thousands were dying. Eventually, after squandering valuable time, common sense prevailed and nations worked together to support the scientific research needed to discover and produce the necessary vaccines. Even now, the essential task of distributing the vaccines to people everywhere is being hampered by political bickering and a failure to appreciate the particular needs of the poorest countries.

Looking back at those initial reactions, it is now clear that political leaders in some countries chose to understate the crisis for local political reasons. They did not want to raise anxiety and cause their own political fortunes to suffer. They did not want to take the precautionary measures necessary in case this would negatively impact on the local economy and lead to negative political consequences for themselves. They wanted to portray themselves as totally in charge and on top of the situation. A great deal of narrow self-interest determined the response to the growing crisis in the early stages. In some cases, this continued well into the crisis and must be considered one of the major contributory factors to the spread of infections, serious sickness and death in some countries.

For the most part, ordinary people were frightened by the growing crisis. The inner personal journey provoked by the pandemic included facing our human fragility and mortality. The daily news bulletins told us of more infections and more deaths in every part of the world. There was nowhere to run to. There was nothing money could buy or science could cure. We were exposed to a danger over which no one had power or control. Preachers and teachers were reduced to silence. There were no easy words or quick solutions. Everyone was in the same situation of helplessness and fear.

When lockdowns were decreed and restrictions imposed, most people complied because they wanted to be safe and to protect their loved ones. People were confined to their homes, were unable to visit relatives and friends, could not go to work and had no outside activities to distract or entertain them. It was a completely unprecedented situation never experienced outside of wartime.

People adjusted to a large extent by relying on social media and the phone. Families were united online via Skype, Zoom etc. YouTube and Netflix as well as all the other sources of information and family entertainment helped greatly. Many young people volunteered to visit the elderly, the housebound and those living alone to insure they had adequate food, warm clothing, and were safe. There was a great upsurge in good will and fellow feeling for neighbors and compatriots locked into their homes and struggling to cope.

During all this time, more and more people were being infected and the number of deaths was rising at an alarming rate. There is a lot of evidence to suggest that the poorest and most vulnerable people were hardest hit. The hospitals and hospital staff were under tremendous strain as the number of cases increased and the facilities came under pressure. There was a lack of the necessary equipment and the protective clothing needed by medical personnel. The images of overcrowded hospital emergency rooms, with doctors and nurses under extreme pressure were very distressing. Doctors, nurses and hospital workers were themselves at great risk. Unfortunately very many of them were infected and died. Just as painful for many people was the inability to visit sick family members and to accompany the dying. The big number of deaths, the TV images of lines of coffins, and the lonely

funerals all contributed to the overwhelming sense of sadness and helplessness.

The Christian Response

What was happening to people inside? What inner resources could they call upon to help them? How were Christian believers coping? How were Passionists able to cope?

The pandemic confronted each one of us with the prospect of sickness and death. We were under attack from an unseen enemy that could wreak havoc and the experts we normally relied upon were at first almost powerless and unable to help. There was no quick fix and as a result the whole of normal life came to a halt. Some people took advantage of this time to look more closely at their lives, how they had been living, their priorities, and what they hoped for the future. It was difficult to live under so many restrictions and without the many people and things they had come to depend upon. It seems that many people came to appreciate the small things in life like the love and support of immediate family, good health, good neighbors, education etc. Others rediscovered the richness of faith and found strength in prayer.

In the midst of the suffering and inner anxiety, many people felt the need to pray. The Churches responded by providing services online. Mass was celebrated and broadcast online and millions of people tuned in every day for some spiritual nourishment. There were talks, interviews, all sorts of religious prayer services, religious reflections, and meditations. Holy Week was celebrated during the lockdown and many people tuned in to the Vatican and other religious websites to follow the services and pray for God's help.

The miracle is that more people did not succumb to depression and mental illness. One of the reasons was the enormous reserves of good will, patience, and compassion that people were able to draw on to help one another. There was a great solidarity in suffering and anxiety that helped to overcome the loneliness and sadness that at first threatened to overwhelm us all. While every suffering is deeply personal, no one was suffering alone. Family members and neighbors, as well as long lost friends were reaching out and offering words of comfort and support. Modern science and medicine was shown to be inadequate,

but the human medicine of love and care were available and plentiful. It was this ocean of human kindness and concern that helped the great majority of people to cope and to come through the greatest challenge of their lives.

Looking at the situation from a religious point of view, the pandemic helps us to understand what exactly we Christians believe and offer the world. We are not in the business of offering political, economic or scientific solutions to the problems of the world. Our area of expertise is to cultivate those inner resources of human kindness and compassion that are so necessary when the political, economic and scientific prove inadequate or fail. It is not economics and science that touch the deepest roots of our humanity, and nourish and sustain us in difficult times. On this occasion, economics and science proved helpless and it was the elusive inner world of the human spirit that provided the help we all needed so much. When politicians and others were anxious about their reputations, Christians and other believers knew that human life and the welfare of people was most important.

We Christians learn to be human by looking at Jesus of Nazareth. From him we learn that people come before laws, institutions, traditions and power. Jesus pointed to the human heart as the seat of loving kindness and mercy. It is these above all that are needed to change our own lives and the whole world. The message of Jesus tells us to go to the poor, the suffering, the dying, and to those who are experiencing the burdens of life. Human love and compassion are the carriers of God's healing and merciful presence into the world. That is why so many Christian believers and others went to help the elderly, the lonely, and the most vulnerable people. Christian faith helps us to believe that even in the most distressing and painful situations, human love can touch people's hearts and help them to experience deep consolation and joy. That was the experience of many people during the darkest days of the pandemic.

Believers don't claim to have the solutions to all the problems confronting the world. We continue to look to wise political leaders, to the best in science and economics to help alleviate suffering and improve the lives of people. But we also know that if politics, science and economics are not imbued with a deep concern for human persons they can quickly become part of the burden and the problem afflicting

people. The welfare of the people comes before political ambition, economics and science. Indeed, politics, science and economics are merely the fallible human means to achieve the good of the people. They are not ultimate and it is part of the mission of the Christian community to insure that people are never reduced to a means or subordinated to the political, economic and scientific ambitions of the rich and powerful. This is something we have learned during this terrible pandemic.

The Passionist Experience

Like people all over the world, Passionists have been responding to the Covid pandemic with faith and creativity. Many of our religious have had traumatic personal experience of the virus. Some were infected or saw their relatives and friends suffer and die. Sadly, some of our religious also died from the virus. In some of our communities, one or more religious contracted the virus and had to be cared for.

Older religious in particular were vulnerable but all of us felt the fear and anxiety about this hidden danger that was causing so much havoc everywhere. Many of our normal activities and routines had to be curtailed or stopped altogether. The brethren were unable to travel for ministry and many apostolic events were cancelled. This was a new experience for everyone and it was not always easy to adapt to long periods of lockdown and a greatly reduced ministry.

In many places, Church activities were seriously curtailed but the number of people logging on for Church services and consulting religious websites has been very encouraging. Passionists everywhere have been ministering to the suffering and bereaved through online celebrations as well as personal contacts to comfort the sick, the dying and the bereaved. It may be that as a result of this painful experience many young people will feel the call to serve God and his people as priests and religious.

One of the big changes in lifestyle brought by the pandemic has been the experience of lockdown and quarantine, the inability to leave the house, and for our students the inability to attend classes outside. Attending classes online is not very satisfactory and students miss the exchange with friends and fellow students. This new situation has been

very challenging because students are used to going out to college, participating in the apostolate and sharing the life of people. For those who are not used to it, staying at home for very long uninterrupted periods with no opportunity to meet people outside can be claustrophobic. Great care has to be taken of everyone affected and opportunities given for sharing as a community and person to person.

Formators have also felt the effects of being confined and trying to accompany and encourage their students in these difficult circumstances. Being at home for a long time gives rise to frustrations and tensions that are not always easy to defuse. The energy and enthusiasm of the young has no outlet. A great deal of patience, understanding and forgiveness is needed when people feel under pressure and out of sorts.

Young people in formation have been deeply affected in other ways by the pandemic. They too have seen their family members and friends sick and some dying. Often they were unable to visit their families and felt helpless. They have been present in the communities with sick members and have helped in the care of the sick and maintaining the safety of the community. In all of this, they have been discovering in the concrete details of their daily life that the whole of life is pervaded by the passion of Jesus in the form of suffering, death, compassion, care, healing and forgiveness. This lived knowledge of the passion is something that cannot be learned from books.

Formators have been doing their best to help the young to bring their experience to prayer where they can ask for the insight and wisdom that only God can give in these challenging circumstances.

The Jubilee

The Covid 19 Pandemic coincides with the Jubilee to mark 300 years of Passionist life. Is this a mere coincidence or does it providentially underline the reality of the passion of Jesus continuing in history and the need to proclaim the saving love of Christ Crucified in every time and place?

We believe that the Passion of Jesus reveals in a startling way the human need for the saving love and mercy of God. The pandemic struck like a

lightening bolt from nowhere and showed up our human weakness and need.

Passionists from all over the world have expressed their appreciation of the different publications, newsletters, and messages that have been circulated to mark the Jubilee. Many of these were devoted to the pandemic and how best to respond to it. The many beautiful reflections, prayers, and references to the passion of Jesus were a spur to individuals and communities to intensify prayer and intercession for the departed, the sick, and the bereaved.

As I write these words, the pandemic continues to rage in many parts of the world. We pray for a speedy end to the pandemic and we ask God to bless the suffering and the dying and to welcome home all who have died. We thank God for all that we have already learned during this difficult time and pray that for as long as this crisis continues we will go on learning and growing as human beings, Christians and Passionist religious.