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Christianity in a time of sickness

Our world is sick. I'm not just referring to the coronavirus pandemic, but to the state of our civilisation, as revealed in this global phenomenon. In biblical terms: a sign of the times.

At the beginning of this unusual period of Lent many of us thought that this epidemic would cause a sort of short-term blackout, a breakdown in the usual operation of society, one that we would ride out somehow, and then soon things would all return to the way they were. They won't. And it wouldn't turn out well if we tried. After this global experience, the world won't be the same as it was before, and it probably oughtn't to be.

It is natural at times of major calamities that we first concern ourselves with the material necessities for survival; but "one does not live by bread alone". The time has come to examine the deeper implications of this blow to the security of our world. The unavoidable process of globalisation would seem to have peaked: the global vulnerability of a global world is now plain to see.

The church as a field hospital

What kind of challenge does this situation represent for Christianity and the church – one of the first "global players" – and for theology?

The church should be a "field hospital" as proposed by Pope Francis. The pope means by this metaphor that the church should not remain in splendid isolation from the world, but should break free of its boundaries and give help where people are physically, mentally, socially and spiritually afflicted. Yes, this is how the church can do penance for the wounds inflicted by its representatives quite recently on the most defenceless. But let us try to think more deeply about this metaphor – and put it into practice.

If the church is to be a "hospital", it must, of course, offer the health, social and charitable care it has offered since the dawn of its history. But as a good hospital, the church must also fulfil other tasks. It has a diagnostic role to play (identifying the "signs of the times"), a preventive role (creating an "immune system" in a society in which the malignant viruses of fear, hatred, populism and

nationalism are rife) and a convalescent role (overcoming the traumas of the past by forgiveness).

Empty churches as a sign and a challenge

Before Easter last year, Notre Dame cathedral in Paris burned down, this year in Lent there are no services in hundreds of thousands of churches on several continent, nor in synagogues and mosques. As a priest and a theologian I reflect on those empty or closed churches as a sign and challenge from God.

Understanding the language of God in the events of our world requires the art of spiritual discernment, which in turn calls for contemplative detachment from our heightened emotions and our prejudices, as well as from the projections of our fears and desires. At moments of disaster, the “sleeping agents of a wicked, vengeful God” spread fear, and make religious capital out of it for themselves. Their vision of God has been grist to the mill of atheism for centuries.

At a time of disasters I don’t see God as an ill-tempered director, sitting comfortably backstage as the events of our world play out, but instead I look on him as a source of strength, operating in those who show solidarity and self-sacrificing love in such situations – yes, including those who have no “religious motivation” for their action. God is humble and discreet love.

But I can’t help wondering whether the time of empty and closed churches is not some kind of cautionary vision of what might happen in the fairly near future: this is what it could look like in a few years’ time in a large part of our world. Haven’t we already had plenty of warning from the developments in many countries, where more and more churches, monasteries and priestly seminaries have been emptying and closing? Why have we been ascribing this development for so long to outside influences (the “secularist tsunami”), instead of realizing that another chapter in the history of Christianity is coming to a close, and it is time to prepare for a new one.

Maybe this time of empty church buildings symbolically exposes the churches’ hidden emptiness and their possible future unless they make a serious attempt to show the world a completely different face of Christianity. We have thought too much about converting “the world” (“the rest”), and less about converting ourselves – not simply “improvement”, but a radical change from a static “being Christians” to a dynamic “becoming Christians”.

When the medieval church made excessive use of the interdict as a penalty, and those “general strikes” by the entire ecclesiastical machinery meant that church services were not held and sacraments were not administered, people started increasingly to seek a personal relationship with God, a “naked faith”. Lay fraternities and mysticism proliferated. That upsurge of mysticism definitely helped pave the way for the Reformation – not only Luther’s and Calvin’s but also the Catholic reformation connected with the Jesuits and Spanish mysticism. Maybe discovery of contemplation could help complement the “synodal path” to a new reforming council.

A call for reform

Maybe we should accept the present abstinence from religious services and the operation of the church as kairos, an opportunity to stop and engage in thorough reflection before God and with God. I am convinced the time has come to reflect on how to continue the path of reform, which Pope Francis says is necessary: not attempts to return to a world that no longer exists, or reliance just on external structural reforms, but instead a shift towards the heart of the Gospel, “a journey into the depths”.

I can’t see that a quick fix in the form of artificial substitutes, such as the broadcasting of masses, will be a good solution at this time when public worship is banned. A shift to “virtual piety”, “remote communion”, and kneeling in front of a TV screen is truly something odd. Maybe we should instead test the truth of Jesus’s words: Where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.

Did we really think that we could solve the lack of priests in Europe by importing “spare parts” for the church’s machinery from seemingly bottomless storehouses in Poland, Asia and Africa? Of course we must take seriously the proposals of the Amazonian synod, but we need at the same time to provide greater scope for the ministry of laypeople in the church; let us not forget that in many territories the church survived without clergy for entire centuries.

Maybe this “state of emergency” is an indicator of the new face of the church, for which there is a historical precedent. I am convinced that our Christian communities, parishes, congregations, church movements and monastic communities should seek to draw closer to the ideal that gave rise to the European universities: a community of pupils and teachers, a school of wisdom, in which truth is sought through free disputation and also profound

contemplation. Such islands of spirituality and dialogue could be the source of a healing force for a sick world. The day before the papal election, Cardinal Bergoglio quoted a passage from Revelation in which Jesus stands before the door and knocks. He added: Today Christ is knocking *from inside the church* and wants to get out. Maybe that is what he just did.

Where is the Galilee of today?

For years I have pondered on the well-known text of Friedrich Nietzsche's about the "madman" (the fool who alone is permitted to speak the truth) proclaiming "the death of God". That chapter ends with the madman coming to church to sing "Requiem aeternam deo" and asking: "What after all are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchres of God?" I must admit that for a long time various forms of the church seemed to me like cold and opulent sepulchres of a dead god.

It looks as if many of our churches will be empty at Easter this year. We will read the gospel passages about the empty tomb somewhere else. If the emptiness of the churches is reminiscent of the empty tomb, let us not ignore the voice from above: "He is not here. He has risen. He has gone ahead of you to Galilee."

A question to stimulate meditation for this strange Easter: *Where is the Galilee of today, where we can encounter the living Christ?*

Sociological research indicates that in the world the number of "dwellers" (both those who fully identify with the traditional form of religion, and those who assert a dogmatic atheism) is falling, while there is an increase in the number of "seekers". In addition, of course, there is a rise in the number of "apatheists" – people who couldn't care less about religious issues or the traditional response to them.

The main dividing line is no longer between those who consider themselves believers and those who consider themselves non-believers. There are "seekers" among believers (those for whom faith is not a "legacy", but a "way"), and among "non-believers", who reject the religious notions put forward to them by those around them, but nevertheless have a yearning for something to satisfy their thirst for meaning.

I am convinced that the "*Galilee of today*", *where we must seek God, who has survived death, is the world of the seekers.*

Seeking Christ among seekers

Liberation Theology taught us to seek Christ among people on the fringes of society. But it is also necessary to seek him among people marginalized within the church, among those “who don’t follow us”. If we want to connect with them as Jesus’ disciples, there are many things we must first abandon.

We must abandon many of our former notions about Christ. The Resurrected One is radically transformed by the experience of death. As we read in the Gospels, even his nearest and dearest did not recognise him. We don’t have to accept at all the news that surrounds us. We can persist in wanting to touch his wounds. Besides, where else will we be sure to encounter them than in the wounds of the world and the wounds of the church, in the wounds of the body that he took on himself?

We must abandon our proselytizing aims. We are not entering the world of the seekers to “convert” them as quickly as possible and squeeze them into the existing institutional and mental confines of our churches. Jesus also didn’t try to squeeze those “lost sheep of the house of Israel” back into the structures of the Judaism of his day. He knew that new wine must be poured into new wineskins.

We want to take new and old things from the treasure house of tradition that we have been entrusted with, and make them part of a dialogue with seekers, a dialogue in which we can and should learn from each other. We must learn to broaden radically the boundaries of our understanding of the church. It is no longer enough for us to magnanimously open a “court of the gentiles”. The Lord has already knocked “from within” and come out – and it is our job to seek him and follow him. Christ has passed through the door that we had locked out of fear of others. He has passed through the wall that we surrounded ourselves with. He has opened up a space whose breadth and depth has made us dizzy.

On the very threshold of its history, the early church of Jews and pagans experienced the destruction of the temple in which Jesus prayed and taught his disciples. The Jews of those days found a courageous and creative solution: they replaced the altar of the demolished temple with the Jewish family table, and the practice of sacrifice with the practice of private and communal prayer. They replaced burnt offerings and blood sacrifices with “lip sacrifice”: reflection, praise, and study of Scripture. Around the same time, early Christianity, banished from the synagogue, sought a new identity of its own. On the ruins of

traditions, Jews and Christians learnt anew to read the Law and the prophets and interpret them afresh. Aren't we in a similar situation in our days?

God in all things

When Rome fell on the threshold of the fifth century, there was an instant explanation from many quarters: the pagans saw it as punishment of the gods for the adoption of Christianity, while the Christians saw it as God's punishment on Rome, for continuing to be the whore of Babylon. St Augustine rejected both those interpretations: at that watershed moment, he developed his theology of the age-old battle between two opposing "cities": not of Christians and pagans, but of two "loves" dwelling in the human heart: the love of self, closed to transcendence (*amor sui usque ad contemptum Dei*) and love that gives of itself and thereby finds God (*amor Dei usque ad contemptum sui*). Doesn't this time of civilizational change call for a new theology of contemporary history and a new understanding of the church?

"We know where the church is, but we don't know where she isn't," the orthodox theologian Evdokimov taught. Maybe what the last Council said about catholicity and ecumenism needs to acquire a deeper content. It is time for a broader and deeper ecumenism, for a bolder "search for God in all things."

We can, of course, accept this Lent of empty and silent churches as simply a brief temporary measure soon to be forgotten. But we can also embrace it as *kairos* – an opportune moment "to put into deeper water" *and seek a new identity for Christianity in a world which is being radically transformed before our eyes*. The current pandemic is certainly not the only global threat facing our world now and in the future.

Let us embrace the approaching Eastertide as a challenge to seek Christ anew. Let us not seek the Living among the dead. Let us seek him boldly and tenaciously, and let us not be taken aback if he appears to us as a foreigner. We will recognise him by his wounds, by his voice when he speaks to us intimately, by the Spirit that brings peace and banishes fear.

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