

## What is God saying to the church through this pandemic?

### Coronavirus and God's answer

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#### AFI 2020 – Twenty years on from Positano

We had planned to meet in Lisbon this year, as we celebrate AFI's twentieth anniversary from the first meeting at Positano. Then the surprise and tragedy of the Coronavirus obliged us to cancel it. White coats and scientists, intensive care and coffins. So many of them as to necessitate the use of mass graves and military trucks. And burials without funerals... The principal elements and symbols of often empty days and many sleepless nights. Icons of the extent and seriousness of one of the greatest tragedies that our generation has ever suffered or experienced.

#### An On-line Consultation

We owe a debt of gratitude to the brothers who promptly thought of a Consultation "on line" to give us the joy of getting together – despite the limitations of a "virtual" meeting – again this year.

The theme at Lisbon was to have been the Holy Spirit (*"The Holy Spirit: Relationship and Mission"*). He will have the place of honour at a future meeting. But the new subject will be: *"What is God saying to the church through this pandemic?"* Let us pray that, through the presentations and the ensuing discussions, the Lord will inspire us as only He is able to do.

During the two days of this Consultation we shall listen to the presentations which the speakers – Himittian and Olowu today, Mraida and Komanapalli tomorrow – will briefly set before us again in a shortened form (you have already read them). After that we shall meet separately in the various on-line language "rooms" to comment on and discuss their ideas.

#### Responsibility for the virus

Like you, naturally I too have asked myself questions. My reflections have been particularly drawn to the question of "responsibility/ies". Should the stumbling-block of evil, and of this tragedy in particular, as with other even worse episodes in the past, be attributed to God, the devil or mankind? Among other things, as we are faced with "disasters" of this severity, there are concerning temptations to flee from reality towards the dimension of magic or super-spirituality, with the aid of conspiracy theories and escapist theologies, even in Christian circles.

So then, *who brought evil into the world?* Who is its source? Who created the virus? Who is responsible? The Scriptural answer – at least for us Christians – ought to be obvious: *"Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people..."* (Rm 5:12). James too says: *"When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone"*

(James 1:13). Not to mention Paul's "*Fathers, do not exasperate your children*" (Eph 6:4) which, though addressed to human fathers, applies even more to our spiritual Father and Creator. No. It isn't God. He cannot be the source of sickness and death, the creator of evil!

*So man is responsible!* And science confirms this conclusion. Prof. Ilaria Capua of the University of Florida says of the current Coronavirus pandemic:

"This is a biological crisis. *Homo sapiens* has caused all this through his carelessness, arrogance, greed, avarice and rapacity. It shows that we cannot overreach, we cannot afford to go beyond Mother Nature's capacity to forgive. We need to plan with her for a virtuous existence; create a new mental map, a less hurried future..."

And even if the hypothesis of the virus having been created in the Wuhan laboratory should turn out to be credible, it would still, and even more, be something man-made.

### **God's answer to evil**

So then, what is God's answer to evil? Given that he is not responsible for evil, does he wash his hands of it? Has he turned his back on us? Absolutely not! According to Scripture, God remains our Father, Creator of the universe and of mankind. And man is his special creation. No matter whether we believe or not, he is the God and Father of all humanity: "*There is... one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all*" (Eph 4:5-6). And it is a basic article of our faith that he loves us. The Bible says, "*God so loved the world...*" (Jn 3:16). He is the Father "*from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name*" (Eph 3:15). As the renowned church father Origen wrote in a lovely poem entitled "The Father's Passion":

"The Father himself too – the God of the universe – who is 'long-suffering and very merciful', one who pities – does he not suffer in some way? Or are you unaware that when he manages human affairs, he suffers human passion? He suffers with the suffering of love..."<sup>1</sup>

God's answer to evil, in harmony with his basic nature, is a response of love and pain, a passionate desire to forgive and redeem man, to the point of a total, extreme self-giving, to the point of becoming man, coming to dwell with man, to live and die for man, rise again and ascend to the right hand of the Father in human flesh for man's benefit, and finally to come and live in man's own flesh. This is God's answer.

### **Christ is God's final answer**

What, then, is God's answer to evil? What is his answer to the "*bondage to decay*" (Rom 8:21) into which sin has thrown us? What is his answer to the "*groaning*" and "*travail*" of mankind and all creation? What is his answer, even to those of us "*who have the firstfruits of the Spirit*" and who continue – through sickness and failure, amid the sorrows and conflicts of life – to "*groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to*

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<sup>1</sup> Origen, *Homilies on Ezekiel*, VI,6.

sonship, the redemption of our bodies"?<sup>2</sup> Christ is the Father's eternal, final and definitive answer to evil in man and in creation.<sup>3</sup>

### Man is God's final answer

But some will comment: Who is equal to such a task? The damage to the earth and the suffering state of mankind are plain for all to see. The Coronavirus shows up still more clearly – as though in a mirror – our inadequacy and fragility. Yet God has decided to invest in man: to make him his brother's keeper, the custodian of creation. To this end he has sent the Holy Spirit to dwell in our hearts. He is the secret key to the *ability* that enables us to take on our *responsibility*. Indwelt by the Spirit of God, we are enabled – together, *"with all the Lord's holy people"* (the church) – *"according to his power that is at work within us, to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine."* (Eph 3:14-21).

### The paradigm of Christ

So with Christ in us (*"hidden with Christ in God"*<sup>4</sup>), we are called to reproduce Christ's style, to espouse and make our own, from within Christ, the life paradigm which we have seen at work in Christ who is our life. God's gift to us is not just Christ's message or his teaching. God's gift to us is himself, Christ, the entirety of his life! Together with him, we learn to reign in life<sup>5</sup> and to reign in death too<sup>6</sup>, in an alternation of death and resurrection which, as we journey through life, progressively moulds our inner being more and more into the likeness of Christ, training us to face the fears and challenges of life, and ultimately the greatest one, death itself. In the past few weeks it has knocked on the doors of tens of thousands of homes, including those of Christians and pastors. And we, trained in the school of death and resurrection, the alternation in our lives of consolation and desolation, can confidently face even this final struggle. Christ will have become our place of immunity, our place of courage and responsibility, of joy and peace. We shall have learned to activate the supernatural in daily life, even in times of powerful challenges, and to translate it into thoughts, words and actions which, as they transform our lives, will allow us to have an impact on the world and sometimes even to transform it.

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<sup>2</sup> "We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved." Rom 8:22-24

<sup>3</sup> "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word..." Heb 1:1-3.

<sup>4</sup> "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God." Col 3:1-3

<sup>5</sup> "...those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness [will] reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ." Rm 5:17

<sup>6</sup> "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth... will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Rm 8:37-39

**Incarnation – Considerations on our responsibility**

The Coronavirus is a wake-up call! *"God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah"* (Acts 2:36). *"Yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever."* And *"I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full"* (Jn 10:10). The first response to the "disorder" caused by sin has been given by God, and it is Christ. He has taken on the responsibility of being on our side, with us and in us in facing evil. Immersed in him and indwelt by him, we now have our part to play. We have a responsibility before God; a responsibility to our neighbour; a responsibility to creation.

**We are called to exercise discernment**

- *With Christ as our starting point*, what does *the present* critical situation reveal to us about Christians' responsibilities at this time: a. about Christians' current condition in their families and churches; b. about the condition of mankind and society; c. about the condition of creation.
- *With Christ as our starting point*, what does this crisis reveal to us about the ways in which Christians *in the past* have faced plagues, epidemics or pandemics (15 greater than this one!), sickness and natural disasters? How have they creatively launched initiatives for the continuance of life and new beginnings? In the field of healthcare, in that of education, in economics, in church life and in government?
- *With Christ as our starting point*, what institutions do we suppose or believe need to be renewed or reformed *with an eye to the future*? How? What is lacking and what needs to be rethought or created for a plan of rebirth?

**AFI – The future that is in us**

And as regards AFI: in what directions do we need to think and move forward?

- Three tracks are contained in our name: Apostolic Fellowship International.
- One more, "the spirit", is in our Mission Statement.
  - Koinonia – Covenant Fellowship.
  - Apostolic – A clearly defined membership. The hearts of the fathers to the children.  
The hearts of the children to the fathers. Seniors and juniors – Honour to the old.  
Space for the young.
  - International – Enlargement. Continental sub-groups – Administrative consolidation. Membership. Special projects.

*"And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus"*

Philippians 4:7

*Giovanni Traettino*