

WHAT IS GOD SAYING TO HIS CHURCH THROUGH THIS PANDEMIC? RETURNING FROM CAPTIVITY

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I want to thank AFI for this privilege of sharing the Word of God with his servants throughout the world, those who are engaged in such a marvelous work and with such an extraordinary power of multiplication. I have been asked to present a theological and prophetic message for this time relating to the central theme: What is God saying to his church in the midst of this Pandemic?

I have heard and read many prophetic words spoken by men of God in these times. Some of them have affirmed that Covid-19 has been sent by God as judgment on a world that is not aligned with his commandments. Others believe that the pandemic is the result of Satan's work, which we need to oppose and resist. And in the midst of this hermeneutic polarization there are variations close to one position or the other. I wish to clarify that I refer to serious presentations from men of God, thoughtful, with a recognized prophetic trajectory. I am not referring to false prophets, but to people of God worthy to be heard. The question then is: Who is right?

Personally, I believe that no one has the final word of prophecy or the exact interpretation. Instead, I consider that the totality of the revelation is given by God to his church, and that God uses his prophets so that each one manifests a bit of God's manifold wisdom. This explains why in the Scriptures we find different prophets speaking to the same people in the same time period, with different messages.

Therefore, this applies first of all to myself. I simply want to share my vision from the light that God has given me. I understand perfectly that the church is like an optical prism that reflects its light manifested in a diversity of colors. No one has "the full white ray" of light, but only one color, which, joined to the others conforms the full revelation. I want to begin with a paragraph from the Word of God:

"When the LORD brought back the captivity of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing. Then they said among the nations, the LORD has done great things for them. The LORD has done great things for us and we are glad. Bring back our captivity, O LORD, As the streams in the South. Those who sow in tears Shall reap in joy. He who continually goes forth weeping, bearing seed for sowing, Shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, Bringing his sheaves with him."

Psalm 126

1. TIME OF CONFRONTATIONS, OF CAPTIVITY AND OF DELIVERANCE

Many people are asking if the *coronavirus* comes from God or from Satan. They ask whether God is sovereign, or if the pandemic is sent by him or at least permitted by him. That is a question that theologians call a theodicy, which means: a justification by God. That is to say, how could a God who is sovereign and loving, allow

evil and suffering to occur? Or if he is not loving, and therefore allows pain, or if he is loving, but not sovereign, and does not have all power to stop it from happening?

Classic theist post Augustinian theology, and western Illuminist thought indicate that the problem of theodicy is a problem of divine providence. That is, they have tried to say that behind all suffering, there is a loving and wise purpose of God, so as to maintain both the absolute sovereignty of God and his limitless love.

The problem with this interpretation of the problem of evil, is that it is absolutely different from the perspective of Jesus. The subject of the preaching and the ministry of Jesus was the Kingdom of God. And the establishment of that kingdom was an open confrontation with the kingdom of darkness. Therefore, to ignore the spiritual conflict between God and the devil in dealing with the problem of evil, implies we are not taking into account what is absolutely clear in the New Testament.

God is sovereign, and in his sovereignty he granted to human beings authority over the creation: *Then God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth* (Genesis 1.28).

Yet in Genesis three human beings submit themselves to the devil's authority, and turn over to the devil their authority over creation. Since then the devil is called the prince of this world (John 12.31, 14.30, 16.11), the prince of the power of the air (Ephesians 2.2) or the god of this world (2 Corinthians 4.4).

God continues to be sovereign, but his sovereignty is "limited". What does that mean? That he has no absolute power? No. That he is no longer on the throne of the universe? No. He continues to be sovereign over heaven and earth and his power is without limit. But the authority over what happens on earth was given to human beings. And we lost it to Satan.

God sent his son Jesus Christ. The core of his preaching and ministry was the kingdom of God. And the kingdom of God consists in taking from the devil the authority that humans gave to him. His ministry was a conflict with Satan and his domain. Finally, Jesus Christ won the battle on the cross, so that we might recover the authority that the Father had given us.

The victory of Christ is absolute, but at the same time is awaiting its ultimate fulfillment. ***But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God, from that time waiting till His enemies are made His footstool.*** (Hebrews 10.12-13). His triumph is assured. He is seated at God's right hand. It is only a question of time; he is waiting until his enemies are made his footstool. This is the well known and dynamic "now but not yet".

How will that turn out? ***And the God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly*** (Romans 16.20). Why the delay? Because Jesus delegated this authority to his church. Thus the church must exercise its authority.

The theistic and illuminist interpretation that has dominated western thought has determined that our problem of evil is not the same problem of evil that Jesus and his disciples faced. This classical perspective has framed the problem of evil as a matter of God's providence. If someone believes that a wise and good purpose in the final analysis is behind a sickness, death, poverty, or hunger, he changes the problem of evil. He converts the problem of evil against which the church must struggle, and transforms it into something to be explained intellectually, about how an all powerful and loving God can be directly or indirectly behind evil. And what is worse, we wind up resigned

and surrendered in a spiritual conflict that we must face and win, reducing it to a theological confusion that we can never fully resolve. This explains why the western church has been inclined to theologize so much about evil, at the same time that it is impotent to come to terms with it. This is different from the New Testament church that was not intellectually confused about evil, but empowered spiritually to overcome it.

I am not affirming that we should explain all the problem of evil as demonic activity, but rather that we cannot ignore the reality of the cosmic spiritual confrontation that affects the powers of the earth and its inhabitants. Therefore, we must also understand this pandemic and post pandemic situation, within the framework of spiritual conflict. And recognize that the earth is in captivity, and that the church must assume its authority and confront the battle against the darkness.

The captivity of biopolitical vigilance

To begin, the pandemic has placed the world literally in captivity and behind that obligatory isolation, for logical reasons of prevention several other serious threats of captivity appear. I am not referring to a conspiracy theory by some national power, but rather of spiritual powers that have dominion over those in power on the earth, so as to condition their decisions, often without their knowledge.

This is the first time in history that most of the world has participated in an obligatory social isolation. In spite of the serious initial errors and of the investigation that has begun to evaluate their responsibility, the World Health Organization has been turned into an entity with power over most of the governments of the world, of the financial markets, and of the inhabitants of the world that submitted to their indications even at the price of losing their constitutional rights¹.

Some see in this the resurgence of a new world order under the biblical figure of the beast and his famous mark on the right hand.² But what really catches our attention is that this danger of biopolitical vigilance does not alarm wild and paranoid believers with apocalyptic threats to life. Some of the most outstanding nonchristian intellectuals, philosophers and academics of the world are talking of a new kind of captivity, or loss of liberty starting with biopolitical vigilance. For instance, Yuval Noah Harari, historian and professor of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, columnist of Time and of Financial Times, and one of the best known voices in recent years, especially with his books *Sapiens* and *Homo Deus*. He says that the *coronavirus* epidemic could become a major milestone in the history of vigilance, since it marks a dramatic transition from vigilance "on the skin" to vigilance "under the skin", within the body. In earlier instances governments were concerned with video cameras that observed what people did, who they were and where they were. But now they are more concerned with what happens within the body: the medical condition, body temperature, blood pressure. That kind of biometric information can tell the government much more about people. By means of a simple biometric sensor that keeps track during 24 hours of the day, the government

¹ Many of these are Christians that view with concern such an empowering of this organism, remembering that this is the same organization that has approved abortion and provided to the nations the protocols for its realization, that has removed homosexuality from the list of irregularities, considering it a variation of human sexuality, as well as other determinations that are contrary to Christian values.

² See Revelation 13.15-18. Pastor José Satirio Dos Santos says that without giving place to alarmist readings, at least we should read this passage and reflect on it in the light of this control of the OMS over the nations of the earth

could for the first time in history know what everyone is feeling and each of the citizens at any moment, through the alterations of blood pressure, temperature, tonsil activity, etc).³

The most widely read German philosopher in all the world is a Korean named Byung-Chul Han. He is a professor in the University of Berlin, although not a Christian, but he affirms the same thing. "Through the pandemic we are moving toward a regimen of biopolitical vigilance. Not only our communications, but also our body and our state of health become objects of digital vigilance. The pandemic shock will serve to consolidate the digital biopolitics at the world level, so that with their control and system of vigilance they take charge of our body. This will give place to a disciplinarian biopolitical society in which the state of our health can be constantly monitored"⁴. These opinions come from some of the most lucid minds, secularly speaking.

The temporal measures have been taken during a state of emergency and are broadly supported. But the temporal measures have the unfortunate habit of outliving the emergencies, especially because there is always a new emergency waiting on the horizon. Even when the cases of *coronavirus* are reduced to zero, some governments could argue that they need to maintain the new systems of vigilance because they fear a second wave of *coronavirus*, or because there is a new source of *ébola* in Central Africa, or because they want to protect people from the seasonal flu.

In the presentation I made in AFI 2018 I spoke of the *kosmos*, the system of domination that is under the control of the *arjón tou kosmou* (prince of the world), which exercises dominion through the *powers*, which Paul calls principalities (*arjás*), powers (*exousías*), rulers (*kosmokrátoras*) of the darkness of this age and spiritual hosts of wickedness (*pneumatiká*) (Ephesians 6.12). These powers are corporate intelligence incorporated in the cultures, nations, and social institutions. There is an intricate structure of domination that exercises its spiritual power over international organizations, the means of communication, educational systems, institutions (including the church), corporations, governments, and which exercise their decisive influence over people. To fail to recognize this reality will limit our struggle to only flesh and blood⁵.

In a world of progressive confrontation at the spiritual level, of growing persecution, the system of demonic domination will do everything possible to subdue the church to captivity, and the loss of freedoms in its worship and its mission.

The captivity of individualism

The pandemic and the post pandemic will deepen one of the fundamental characteristics of our time, which is individualism. This reality also constitutes one of the favorite strategies of the devil. One of his main intentions in the egotism of our times is the eradication of community. The destruction of marriage, the fragmentation of the family, the weakening of the school, the conversion of social clubs and of commercial

³ Yuval Noah Harari: "The crisis of Covid-19 presents itself as the decisive moment of our era", interview of La Tercera. <https://www.latercera.com/tendencias/noticia/entrevista-a-yuval-noah-harari-la-crisis-del-covid-19-se-perfila-como-el-momento-decisivo-de-nuestra-era/3LU4RW0IJ5HCTPPH2CXWU3E6ZY/>

⁴ Byung-Chul Han, *La desaparición de los rituales* [The disappearance of rituals], Barcelona: Editorial Herder, 2020, 128p.

⁵ Carlos Mraida, AFI, Fuerteventura 2018: *La rebelión contra el Padre, la madre de todas las batallas* [Rebellion against the Father, the mother of all battles].

businesses, the secularization of the sacred and the constant ideological attack against all that is religious. The community and community life are disappearing.

The pandemic has accelerated this process. The enclosure that could have been a motive of renewed family encounter, is nevertheless leaving a sequel of increased separations and divorces, the obligatory separation of parents and their children and of grandparents with their grandchildren. The belief that education is realized with a virtual class room, while ignoring the irreplaceable value of the process of socialization of children and adolescents. The work at home or telework that eliminates companionship. The replacement of sports with spectators, and spectators that do not share a common space. Churches that are unable to congregate.

We are becoming more and more connected as a product of digitalization, but this hypercommunication does not bring with it more close relationships. Social networks have also terminated the social dimension while the ego becomes more prominent. Today we are continually invited to communicate our opinions, needs, desires or preferences, even that we tell to others our whole life. Each one produces himself or herself and is self-represented. The whole world practices worship, worship of the ego.

We have communication without community. As Byung-Chul Han says, we increasingly celebrate fewer community gatherings, each person celebrates by himself. The crisis of the *coronavirus* has completely terminated our community rituals. We cannot even shake hands. Social distancing destroys all physical proximity. The pandemic has given place to a quarantined society in which all community experience is lost. Because we are digitally interconnected, we continue to communicate, but without a community experience that makes us happy.

Isolation is not only a question of preventing contagion, but also an accelerator of loneliness. Many people are suffering and damaging their mental health due to this situation. We isolate the older generation within their families to care for their life, and many die with their defenses debilitated due to loneliness. We are all more or less digitally connected, but we lack physical proximity, community that we can touch and feel. The virus isolates people. It aggravates the loneliness and the isolation that, in any case, dominates our society. Some have given the name *corona blues* to the depression that is the consequence of the pandemic.

The captivity of emptiness

The pandemic and post pandemic will continue to deepen the inner emptiness of people. It is not the fruit of sanitation, but rather the deepening provoked by joining isolation with the virtual situation that accelerates what society is living. People are seeking new stimulus, emotions, experiences, because nothing satisfies. And the novelty of it does not last. It is rapidly trivialized and provokes more desire for something new. The passion provoked by the discovery of something novel barely lasts an instant. And the next instant comes with the promise of relieving our disillusionment with the former one. But we already know that the new experience will not fulfill our expectation, and we again fall into apathy and emptiness.

That sensation of emptiness combined with isolation is what activates the hypercommunication and the hyperconsumer mentality. The intensity of life and

hypercommunication are forms of the consumer mentality that vainly seek to fill the void.

The captivity of poverty and social inequality

At the beginning of the pandemic there was the illusion that the virus did not recognize social distinction. But with the passing of time the reality has demonstrated the opposite. Vulnerability and mortality depend on the socio-economic situation. This is not something new provoked by Covid-19 but rather something that the pandemic has only confirmed and exacerbated the social differences and inequalities. It has made even more transparent the grave social problems, the debts that the world system has with the poorest, and the enormous inequalities that abound in every society.

In the United States, principally it is the Afroamericans that get sick and die. The same is true in France. As a consequence of the confinement, the trains that connect Paris with the suburbs are overflowing. In the peripheral areas of the large cities the principal victims are the poor workers who are immigrants, for the simple reason that they have to leave home to go to work. Working at home is not for the poor. Telework, as a mechanism to maintain production in pandemic times, is also an example of inequality. Telework is not available for factory workers, those working in cleaning, sales personnel or those that pick up the trash. The wealthy, on the one hand, move to their homes in the suburbs. The pandemic is not only a medical problem, it is also social. In Buenos Aires the explosion of cases is concentrated in the emergency villas, and in the neediest neighborhoods of Greater Buenos Aires.

But the pandemic not only exposed the system of injustice and inequality in which we live; it aggravated it. The brutal downturn of the markets, the enormous growth of unemployment, the inflationary processes, the economic recession and depression castigate especially those who are most in need and enlarges the breech between the rich and poor in obscene measure.

In Argentina since the beginning of the pandemic the percentage of poor people has grown 10%, including at this writing 45 % of the population. And Unicef expects that by year's end, 58.6 % of Argentine children will be poor, and 16.3 % will fall into indigence.

To the significant loss of employment is added the fact that the pandemic will accelerate the process of the increased use of robots in the workplace, since for certain tasks, and to avoid potential contagion, Covid-19 has already normalized the displacement of humans in favor of robots. For example, those who care for the aged have been replaced with robots. The same has occurred in other tasks. Just as in other areas, the pandemic has been a tremendous accelerator of processes that were already affected. Some experts talk about the possibility that governments grant to citizens a "Basic Universal Income", which for many appeared utopian. But even the conservative government of the USA is at the point of providing a basic salary for the duration of the crisis. But as with other things that occur in times of crisis, they wind up remaining as a possibility in times of great unemployment. Just as Yuval Noah Harari affirmed: "Where the Industrial Revolution created the working class, the next great revolution will create the "unnecessary class"⁶. Once the sanitary emergency has passed we will see a time in

⁶ Yubal Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: Breve historia del mañana* [Brief history of tomorrow], Barcelona: Editorial Debate, 2016, 496 p.

which governments will carry out social experiments that will identify the world of the following decades. The control through fear and biovigilance will be used to seek to quell social resistance and revolt.

The captivity of fear

According to experts in mental health, the effects of our fears can be more devastating than the pandemic itself. Fear is becoming capable of generating a worldwide social and economic crisis. And its effects upon our health are indeed grave. Fear affects the immune system and makes a person more susceptible to suffering with greater severity diseases such as the *coronavirus*. The virus finds a weakened organism due to the stress produced by fear that turns out lowering the system's defenses.

This fact had already been discovered by Martin Luther. In the German city of Wittenberg, during the plague of 1539, an authentic "save yourself if possible" occurred. The great leader of the Protestant Reformation, noted that his fellow citizens fled in the midst of the panic. Those who were sick had no one to care for them. According to Luther, fear was an evil even more terrible than the sickness itself. It disturbed the brains of people and drove them to the point of not worrying even for their own families.

There have been and still are other infirmities that cause more contagion and death, but nothing generates what has been popularized as the pandemic of fear and anxiety. Some sicknesses and pandemics in history swept through large parts of humanity. Smallpox produced 300 million deaths. The bubonic plague 100 million. The Spanish flu between 50 and 100 million. Measles makes 200 million victims and still has not been eradicated in the world. HIV has already killed 25 million. Cholera, three million. The mortality toll of *CoronaVirus* is between 0.2 and 0.4 % according to different estimations. That of influenza is less than 0.1%, but annually some 600 thousand persons die. In the United States, the flu is passed on each year to 26 million persons, of which fourteen thousand die. In Argentina we have less than 400 deaths due to the *CoronaVirus*, but 30,000 die each year due to flu and pneumonia. The question then becomes: Why did Covid-19 generate a pandemic of international terror like no other sickness?

Gustavo Gonzales explains that there are four basic reasons. First, the values of individualism, hedonism and agnostic secularism evident in post-modernism have mixed with fear of a world that has become absolutely unstable and which generated three great global paranoias: fear of another, fear of unknown sicknesses and fear of a rapid and general financial crisis. Second, the conditions of virtual and informative connectivity, which enable the expansion of information with a speed heretofore unknown. Third, the sanitary awareness of today's people. Fourth, the world economy is based more and more on globalization and its fluctuations⁷.

Byung-Chul Han says: "Panic toward the virus is exaggerated. The average age of those who die in Germany due to Covid-19 is 80 or 81 years and the median life expectancy is 80.5 years. This reveals that our panic reaction to the virus is what is wrong with our society. We live in a society of survival that is based in the final analysis on the

⁷ If there is a space that is most sensitive to fear, it is economy. The markets already created their own VIX (Volatility Index) which is called the "Index of Fear" and precisely measures the fear of volatility of the markets.

fear of death. Today survival will become something absolute, as if we were in a state of permanent war... Priests also practice social distancing and use protective masks. They sacrifice their belief in survival. Charity is manifested through distancing. Virology destroys the power of theology. Everyone listens to the virologists, that have absolute sovereignty of interpretation. The narrative of the resurrection gives place to the ideology of health and survival. When facing the virus, belief becomes a farce"⁸.

We find ourselves in these days of instant communications, Internet and social networks immersed in an impacting global trauma, captives of control, individualism, emptiness and fear, expressions of the prophet Isaiah's announcement: ***For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and deep darkness the people*** (Isaiah 60:2). But in that context of darkness, God is still on the throne and shines upon his people: ***But the Lord will arise over you, and His glory will be seen upon you***. The result in this time of a new reality is: ***Gentiles shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising*** (Isaiah 60:2-3).

Therefore, I believe that besides being a time of captivity it is a time of liberation. Thus Psalm 126 affirms: ***When the Lord brought back the captivity of Zion, we were like those who dream.*** For that reason, I want to announce what I feel is coming following the pandemic.

2. TIME TO DREAM

When the Lord brought back the captivity of Zion, we were like those who dream.

I want to challenge you in this time of confusion, captivity, change and uncertainty to dream. It is time for those who are older to dream, for apostolic ministries to dream of new things, great and marvelous. May they be dreams that inspire your people, your pastors. We are not only to delegate responsibilities but to inspire our people. And that inspiration occurs when we are able to share with others God's dreams. Time for the elders to dream and for the youth to have visions. As an apostle, as an elder, your dreams will inspire God's visions in your pastors, leaders and people.

The antidote for control and fear are dreams and visions. Therefore, you and I need to dream concerning what is to come. Not only to be informed of what is coming in the world in the new reality, but to dream of what is coming in the work of God for his church in your city, in your nation, in the world. New dreams, new visions, new goals. The challenge is not because the world will change; the challenge is because God always wants you to go for more, because the path of the just is like the morning sun that is rising. Because for those who understand, like you, the path of life is always ascending. Because you will grow from power to power. Because the last wine is better than the first. Because the latter glory is greater than the first. The best of your ministry is not in what you have already done. It is in what you will dream in this time, and in the visions that you will inspire in those who are younger. I prophesy that the best is yet to come in your life. You are not going to retreat; you are going for more.

In times of captivity, deliverance is experienced, and liberation is shared in flight. Dreams and visions are the wings that God gives you to fly and be free. If you are tired,

⁸ Byung-Chul Han, *La desaparición de los rituales*, [The disappearance of rituals] Barcelona: Editorial Herder, 2020, 128p.

if you are stuck, if this captivity, not just of the pandemic, but the state of the world, has minimized your strength, the promise is that God gives new strength to those who have none, and that you will rise to fly like the eagle. The younger ones need you because even they grow weary and fatigued, but you will rise on the wings of the dreams that God gives you and the vision that you will inspire, and before the vertiginous changes, you will run and not grow weary, and you will walk in the new reality and not faint. Yes! He gives you strength to guide the processes in your city.

For that purpose, you will become pregnant with dreams so you can inspire visions to be fulfilled for the church in your city and in your nation. Please! Give yourself permission to dream. We need you to dream for the church and the world, to come out of captivity. Do not wait to see what will happen; make it happen as God wants!

3. TIME FOR COMMUNITY CELEBRATION

Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing (v.2).

The liberating apostolic task for the captivity of individualism will be to overcome this time of comuni-cation with comuni-ty, that is, to restore the church as a body, so that the church can impart to the world what it needs. According to Jesus there are only two models for the church: the church as the Father's house, and the church as a market. The latter is a church captive to the culture of each epoch, and thus unable to transform the current reality. The church as a marketplace today, among other characteristics, is a church captive to individualism, in the culture of the show, narcissism,⁹ and against the characteristics that identify the modern church and turn it into a market: individualism, a "show" culture, narcissism, consumerism.

Just as in all the rest, the pandemic has accelerated the process that was already happening. The inability to be together because of the isolation is emphasizing individualism. The inability to congregate to worship as a community is increasing the culture of the religious show. The people "seen" the worship on line, while they eat, or while lying down, completely isolated from each other, "receiving" what is presented on the screen, giving a greater place to the narcissistic centrality of the ego.

I am grateful that we have all the means and platforms that are available today, with which we minister to people. They are marvelous means to reach many people, to take the message to the unconverted, to the believers that are distant. And once we are past the limitations of the pandemic, we must continue using all these means for those ends. But that is not the reality of the church. To believe that the only or most important thing is to preach the gospel is a tendency that is decades old in the practical theology of the church which, among other things, has contributed to an individualistic, privatized practice that has ignored that the Head and the body are inseparable, and has provoked the idea that the largest church in all western cities, is the one that does not meet together.

The danger of gnosticism today is the risk of a docetic message, unincarnate, without a body. The gospel is not only preaching; it is primarily incarnation. And incarnation is not possible without a body, without community, without family, without a "sacred kiss", without "laying hands on the sick to be healed", without physical contact.

⁹ For greater development of this subject, see: Carlos Mraida, AFI Roma 2015: *El futuro de AFI: El desafío de la iglesia en Sudamérica*. [The future of AFI: Challenge of the church in South America].

Therefore, a sign that we have come out of the cultural and pandemic captivity will be, like the Israelites in Babylon, that we celebrate as a community. As Byung-Chul Han says, our culture is “celebrating fewer community festivities; each one celebrates alone”. Unfortunately, I believe, some pastors in this time have overvalued the return to home meetings (which in many countries are not even permitted) and under estimated the importance of gathering in the temples. In some houses they even celebrate that impossibility, as a kind of return to the primitive. But I believe that our gatherings in our temples are not only for the production of liturgical events, as some assert. Rather they are a counter-cultural response to the spirit of this world that sacrifices the community on the altar of ego and suppresses the collective celebration. The argument that the primitive church had no temples is very weak. It is simply to limit the community impact to a building. They forget that Acts 5.42 says: ***And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.*** That is to say, the early believers lived the experience of the small group as well as the community concentration. Because for the nurturing, growth and integral spirituality, what is required of all community circles is: family, small group, community of faith.

Those who ignore this fact and make the virtual space the new form of being the church, without realizing it they are encouraging the #1 Enemy of the gospel, which is individualism. Their reaction should be, not to the community gathering in a building, but to the culture of a “show” which for decades has been happening in those temples, and that the virtual space without a doubt is going to grow. We have properly been correcting the confusion that causes people to say: “I am going to church”, instead of saying: “we are the church”. Still, it is not the building, nor the community gathering that is the root cause of this error. What has provoked this distortion is a leadership that has turned the temple into an auditorium, in which a religious show is presented, and in which some ten persons minister, including pastors and musicians, and the rest receive the ministry. The problem is that we have not made of our encounters opportunities to function as a community, with collective ministry, where everyone functions with their gifts and ministries, conscious of the fact that “we are the church”.

If before the pandemic more than 50 % of the believers in all the cities did not meet together, in the post pandemic the percentage will increase. The church will increase the congregational activity, as well as the on line activity, encouraged to reach those who are not involved. But when this occurs, many of those who on earlier occasions congregated will choose to “see” the same meeting-show of ten persons from their home, without congregating, with no need to travel, without having to “dress up”, without any demands upon them personally. To the deformation of “we are going to church” will now be added “we see” the church. In order to avoid this possibility, a liberating apostolic ministry is needed to set us free from the captivity. The first and most important action must be a renewal in the mentality of the pastors. We must teach that the audience is not the church.¹⁰

What has been happening has been emphasized as we have found ourselves obliged to introduce to all our people the virtual space on a massive scale. I refer to the lack of belonging and to the practice of religious consumerism: people that navigate and serve themselves as in a buffet restaurant of autoservice, with the music they prefer, the preacher they prefer from anywhere in the world. This happened before, but

¹⁰ Norberto Saracco, Consejo de Pastores de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, mayor 2020.

in a much smaller sector of the people. That is to say, the pandemic accelerated the process.

I use all kinds of media and platforms. And I am grateful for the opportunity to use these media, but I feel that we must not stop discipling continually to define the nature of the church. In the decade of the 50s, Marshall McLuhan, father of the science of communication, then said that the use of technology is like a prosthesis that allows us to extend beyond the reach of our body to those places that we cannot physically reach. But he added that every prosthesis presupposes an amputation. Let us use all the platforms to communicate, but without losing community. Let us extend our reach, but without amputation of the body.

In my city it is probable that we are still months away from being able to meet again in small groups and congregate as the church. But I am already dreaming of what will be our first encounter where our mouths will be filled with laughter and our lips with praise. We will celebrate the Lord, of course. But we can do that separated and individually. We will celebrate the Lord, but we will also celebrate the fact that we are the church, body, community, family.

The world that is ahead will be more and more one of isolation, loneliness. Before the pandemic, the British government had established a new ministry for the nation: the ministry of the solitary. I live in a city where there are many more that live alone than those that live in a family. The devil is besieging humanity with his worst threats and strategies. And loneliness is one of them. But as we see the darkness encroaching, the awareness should increase in you and in me that upon us the light has dawned. And that people will come to us more desperate than ever.

A great harvest time is coming! Why? So that we can have giant evangelistic campaigns? No! Instead, we will give to the people what they need the most, and which only the church --if it is the true church-- can give them. If the church is only an auditorium, whether physical or virtual, there are better secular shows elsewhere. If the church is a platform where there is a dynamic communicator, musicians and singers, there are better communicators and musicians elsewhere. If the church is an adequate collection of digital platforms, there are others that manage them better and have millions of followers.

Thank God for the auditoriums, and for the physical platforms, and for the pastors, and for the musicians, and for the virtual platforms. But none of those things constitute the essence of the church and none of that is what the church can give to a world facing growing darkness, anguish, fears, loneliness, isolation, emptiness, misery, and depression. Fully conscious that darkness will cover the earth, but upon us God's light has dawned, and that the people will walk in our light, we are determined more than ever to be the church of Jesus Christ, the Father's house, the family of faith, community, the body incarnate serving and giving love. So the time has arrived and the light is shining more than ever, so that the nations might walk in our light. It is the time when the church is to rise and shine more than ever. ***Arise and shine.*** It is time for the best of the church to flourish. What is it? *Alélon*. In the New Testament that word appears 59 times, and means: ***one another***. That we might return and learn and teach in depth that each one must meet the need of others, of contact, closeness, the look of love, the living voice.

4. TIME OF IMPACT

The psalm also announces that as a result of the process of liberation of God's people and through God's people, there will be produced an impact in the nations.

Social Impact

Then they said among the nations, “The Lord has done great things for them.” The Lord has done great things for us, and we are glad (vv.2-3).

Harari says: "The old book of rules is coming apart, and a new book of rules is being written". The answers that the governments of the earth, science, and the markets do not have, God will give to his church, and the nations will walk in her light. And to you God gave the task of leading those processes. Brazilian anthropologist Lilia Schwarcz says that the pandemic is the death of the humanistic project. The philosopher Mario Sergio Cortela says: "We were dethroned as humanity, especially the more intellectual elements, the most scholastic, those indicated for some type of political or economic power. We have been knocked off the pedestal where we were standing"¹¹.

We cannot leave the transformation in the grip of a virus. It is the church that must lead in the process of bringing in the new. While everyone, including thousands of pastors, are longing to "return to normal", God wants to terminate the dark normality of captivity under the system of demonic domination, of individualism, of emptiness and the apathy of consumerism, of poverty and inequality and fear. Antonio Gramsci defined crisis in this way: "Crisis is the moment in which the old order is extinguished and the time comes to fight for a new world, overcoming resistances and contradictions".

For that we need apostolic ministries synchronized with God, those that look beyond the pastoral vision and see the city. An apostle is not a pastor with several congregations. The pastor's focus is on the area of his own congregation. But the apostle must view the complete picture of the church in the city and of the city. The nations will begin to say "Great things the Lord has done with them." The world does not have answers. The nations and governments will walk in the light of God's people. The virus brought into evidence the failure of world leadership. It is the opportunity for something new. The model of leadership based on confrontation as a way of acquiring power will have no place in a world that requires agreements, solidarity, dialog, consensus, community. It is the opportunity to raise up a leadership according to Jesus' model. To raise up among the younger ones capable of a new leadership for our nations. Transformation and life as a community will not be the product of a pandemic, but the church of Jesus Christ, led by apostolic ministries that are clearly dedicated to be apostles. It is time to accomplish the great things that God will do with his church and through his church in the new reality.

¹¹ Citado por Ricardo Agreste, <https://youtube/Riz7OeKpMYU>

Renewing Impact

Bring back our captivity, O LORD, as the streams in the South. (v.4). The NTV translates the last phrase thus: ***as the streams renew the desert.*** In order for the church to be an agent of transformation it must be renewed. Apostolic ministry should lead this liberating process of renewal in at least three aspects. In eclesial structures, forms, methodology. The pandemic imposed an obligated actualization of the church, that normally is a system very resistant to change. But it is not a question of doing the same thing, only now done virtually. A new integral viewpoint is required of all of us. And especially concerning how to live dynamically the personal relationship, but now online. Those that do not adapt to the new reality and to do so quickly and efficiently will suffer.

Apostolic ministry should lead a renewal in unity. The captivity of individualism is damaging the advance that had been given in unity. The digital world requires a new covenant of unity among the pastors. Cyberspace is mission territory for no one and for everybody. Every one ministers to every one else. And there have already appeared disloyal pastoral practices that seek to capture those of other congregations in the same city. The largest congregations with more technical resources and people are absorbing people from the smaller congregations. These crises debilitate the organizations. The groups that brought pastors together have lost their strength. There is a crisis of representation in the organizations that bring others together. The people in the midst of these crises feel that those organizations do not respond or represent their needs. In times of crisis the people follow individuals and not organizations. Pastors that seek recognition at the price of deteriorating unity. An apostolic ministry is required that understands the new reality and rebuilds relations and promotes a new move toward unity.

Above all, apostolic ministry needs to conduct a renewal in depth, a return to the biblical essence of what it means to be the church. When the church is captive to the culture of the show, the congregations with greater resources will continue to absorb believers from those that have fewer possibilities. This culture of the eclesial show, along with the pandemic has deepened. The distortion is no longer that the people “go” to church, but rather that they “see” the church, instead of being the church.

The church that not only sustains itself but also grows, in the coming days will have two characteristics. It will be a church filled with the fire of the Holy Spirit and it will be a community church. These are the two things that will make people want to participate. For they represent the two central needs of people, and that no one else can provide except the church. The reason people will congregate in the future, and will not stay at home to “see” the church, is that they experience strongly the presence of the Lord and the life in community.

Missiologist Leslie Newbigin said: “We were not created to be conformed to the world, but to be transformed through the renewal of our minds. God uses opportunities and changes in history to shake up his people, from time to time, so as to avoid their being conformed to the world”.

Revival Impact

He who continually goes forth weeping, bearing seed for sowing, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him. (Psalm 126:6)

I am convinced that a time of great harvest is coming. And that apostolic ministries should lead the process. That process begins with sowing. This is the time of sowing. The sowing is with tears. The context of uncertainty, fear, emptiness, loneliness, depression, social and material need, is very painful ground but fantastic ground for sowing the seed of God's word. The virtual world is an instrument with no limits to do so, but also a very painful one. Juan Castillo says: "The virtual church invites us to deny our emotions, almost forcing ourselves to keep happy, energized and positive. There are also times to weep and to feel the pain of separation. The true church weeps with those that weep. Facing the impossibility of meeting together and seeing each other is a catastrophe and we should lament that loss, and this lamentation will serve as proof of our Christian love"¹². But a seed planted with tears will bring us a great harvest. We are already seeing signs and wonders, like we did not experience before the pandemic, especially with children, adolescents and young people. I am convinced that when we are able to meet again, in the midst of personal community life, miracles will explode and that new generation will be empowered to be the protagonists of the great coming harvest.

Apostolic ministries must sow in those new generations in a special way. With older persons it was hard for us to understand the earlier world of *CoronaVirus*. Now the new reality is coming. And in that new reality not yet created, we will need to give place to our youth to lead with us and share the revival. We are living in the end time and the beginning of another. Revivals take place in that phase. They occur in the midst of times: ***O LORD, revive your work in the midst of the years! In the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy*** (Habakkuk 3.2).

A marvelous time is coming. We are expecting sheaves. We will gather a great harvest. The nations will walk in the light of the church. We will go out and deliver people from captivity. For that reason it is a time to dare to dream. Soon our mouth will be filled with laughter and out tongue with praise for among all the nations of the earth they will say: ***The Lord has done great things for us!*** Amen.

Carlos Mraida

¹² Juan Castillo, *El nacimiento de la criptoiglesia* [The birth of the cryptochurch].