

ENGLISH

*What is God saying to the Church
by the pandemic?*

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WORLDWIDE

AFI2020

Apostolic Fellowship International

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What is God saying to the church through this pandemic?

Coronavirus and God's answer

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 – Himitian 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...”¹

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*

¹ Origen, *Homilies on Ezekiel*, VI,6.

*adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies”?*² Christ is the Father’s eternal, final and definitive answer to evil in man and in creation.³

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”*⁴), 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 life⁵ and to reign in death too⁶, 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.

² “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

³ “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.

⁴ “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

⁵ “...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

⁶ “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

Dele Olowu

WHAT IS GOD SAYING TO THE CHURCH BY THE PANDEMIA

A PASTORAL APPROACH

"...and there shall be famines, pestilences and earthquakes in diverse places. All these are the beginning of sorrows..."

Mathews 24.7-8

"But ye shall receive power after the Holy Ghost has come upon you after that the Holy Ghost has come upon you, and ye shall be witnesses to me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria and unto the uttermost part of the earth "

Acts 1. 8

INTRODUCTION

We serve a God who speaks to His people. Unfortunately, it is not everyone that can hear what He is saying because He is a Spirit and anyone who would hear Him must learn to worship and approach Him in spirit and in truth (Jn. 4. 24). It is also the case that no one has a monopoly of hearing from God. Strangely the Bible gives us examples when God used a donkey or plant to speak to renowned prophets (Numbers 23: 28-31; Jonah 4: 6-11).

Since the Lord can use anyone to speak to His people, permit me to thank the organizers of this online platform for the honor of speaking to this august gathering on this topic at this time when the life of the global economy and society seem to hang in the balance.

I plan to set forth the facts concerning COVID briefly. Then proceed to highlight what I believe the Lord is saying to the church and the wider world through the church. Our prayer is that we would become more effective in being the voice of the One who has called us to build His Kingdom in our world.

1) FACTS

- a) As at the present time, no consensus exists among the scientific community on the origins, nature, evolution or cure of COVID-19 virus. Yet, politicians, business people, even medical doctors and ordinary citizens in practically all nations have deferred until now to these 'experts' or scientists to tell us what

to do to patients, non-patients, the economy as well as the whole of society to respond to the virus. It is also become clear that new players have entered the global policy debates and several options are on the table. In the meanwhile, the established pressure groups resist these new comers...e.g. some doctors claiming that chloroquine with some other drug works and a country like Madagascar announcing validity of its cure etc.

- b) It is also becoming clear that COVID-19 policy as with all policies is not just about facts but also about values and opinions of some embedded politicians, health practitioners and ambitious entrepreneurs who might like to profit from the pandemic. Moreover, even within the scientific community there are choices to be made that require values which reflect societal consensus on moral choices that transcend facts or science. For instance if people must die from this virus, should society make a choice between older persons with prevailing conditions or the young and able through economic collapse? It is also emerging that more of the older people are dying not from the virus but from media hype that focuses on deaths (over 300,000 globally) and not on the possible more positive news of the larger number of persons who are surviving the virus out of the 5million persons infected and why they survive? In fact, there are now two schools of thought on the future of this virus. One that predicts several waves of the virus and another suggesting that the virus has run its course and many more people have actually been infected (than was supposed, because they were never tested) and that our bodies had developed natural immunity or antibodies to the virus. This is the famous division between the Imperial College and Oxford University schools of thought. The latter is gaining more traction as we speak in the policy arenas of most countries.
- c) Contrary to the expectations of the Owner and Founder of the Church, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Christian community has been overly quiet and reticent in entering into these discussions as it has done generally to other issues in the public arena in most nations of the world. This absence of the voice of the Christian community has tended to lead to the relegation of Christian norms and policy options. It is clear that God expects the voice of the church to be much stronger on both COVID-19 and our respective social, economic and political spaces. It is another reason we appreciate AFI for convening this consultation.
- d) Earlier this week (May 19), the World Health Assembly, which oversees the work of WHO voted in favor of an independent investigation into the handling of the current pandemic by the global agency. WHO had reversed itself on several issues relating to COVID—as to its source, spread, whether to wear or not wear masks etc. It remains to be seen how the resolution would be implemented in the face of strong interests contesting the issues and highly polarized secular media that seems to care less for truth than the

representation of their political/economic sponsors. One thing that is already becoming clearer by the day is that this virus has exposed underlying forces of global contestation for power, influence and hegemonic dominance between and among key nations in the eastern and western hemispheres as well as key actors in the private and public spheres.

- e) In the meantime, the economic and social impacts of COVID -19 have been massive in all countries. Prospering economies have gone into recession and as noted above altogether some 5 million persons have been infected by the disease with over 300, 000 dead. Nations have thrown huge stimulus funds at the problem to relieve their citizens but if this virus is not such a great killer than has had been thought. There is therefore a strong push everywhere to reopen their national economies that have been devastated by the fears of the virus. In fact, a lot of psychological factors—domestic violence, negative aspects of isolation, fear mongering by the media etc—have become injurious to citizens in many countries. The worst hit have been citizens from countries of the global south where the governments are begging for international aid to help their own citizens and where the recipient governments have remained opaque, corrupt and mismanaged such assistance.

2) WHAT GOD HAS SAID AND IS SAYING TO THE CHURCH AND OUR WORLD

On the eve of the New Year the Lord spoke through Pastor Enoch Adeboye, the General Overseer of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) when he released his prophecy for Year 2020. He specifically announced that on the international stage the new year would be like “a child undergoing convulsion”—with several earthquakes, fires, floods etc. The reason for this is sin, which has become more brazen in recent times in all nations. However, he noted that if we would pray, the Lord would mitigate this.

He has not been alone, in fact another African gospel Minister from Zimbabwe prophesied four years before that a global pandemic would come out from China that would ravage the whole world. He included in his prophecy that an old curative (chloroquine) would be found to be effective against the virus.

As we noted at the beginning of this paper, the Lord Jesus Christ was perhaps the first to give such prophetic insights to His disciples who were disappointed that the Kingdom they expected the Messiah to inaugurate was not coming during His first coming. He gave them detailed signs of His return first to take His own away in a rapture and subsequently as the King of Kings to judge and reign in this world from Jerusalem. Mt. 24. 7-8. This is consistent with the prophecies delivered by the major and minor prophets (Is. 9.6-7, Dan. 2. 44, 11: 32, 12: 3, Zech. 14: 1-4, 8-9).

The above also resonate well with the Lord's response to King Solomon's prayer at the great temple dedication that if His people went astray to serve other gods, He would punish them with natural disasters: *draught, locusts and pestilence*. However, if the people, called by His name would HUMBLE themselves, PRAY, SEEK His FACE, and TURN FROM THEIR WICKED WAYS, He would hear from heaven, FORGIVE THEIR SIN and HEAL THEIR LAND. 2 Ch. 7. 13-14. This statement has three important implications. First, those who matter to the healing of any nation experiencing pestilence such as this one are the people of God. Second, if these ones would take some specific prescribed actions, then their land or nation would be healed by God. Thirdly, the healing of the land would not just be from physical or economic disasters but also from the spiritual and moral decline that led to these disasters in the first place. If indeed, it is the case that the eating of blood of animals in wet markets led to the transmission of the virus from animal to humans is it out of place for the church to alert the rest of the world that the eating of blood was condemned by God in the old and new testaments? (Lev. 17:10-12, Acts 15: 28-29).

Similarly, in the Old Testament times, when God's people (Judah) experienced the plague of locusts prophet Joel spoke of the need for repentance by God's people—leaders as well as followers so there can be restoration (Joel 2: 15-29). The major prevention for this virus seems to be life-style changes e.g. what we eat, how we live (with or without exercise), practicing social distance, self-isolation, hand washing etc. Is this not saying the same things to modern man what Joel said to the people of Judah of his time?

In other words, this pandemic is a wake-up call first and foremost to the church towards speaking to herself through a return to the word (revival) and secondarily towards the repositioning of the church in society for greater influence and impact by believing and speaking what the Lord has said and is saying. It means we as leaders repent and speak first to ourselves on the state of God's church. This means a clear message of repentance and humility and turning from our wicked ways before addressing the society.

3) THE CHURCH'S INFLUENCE AND IMPACT ON SOCIETY

The new testament suggests from what we read for instance in Mark 5: 1-20, Acts 8: 5-8 that a church should be assessed by two key indicators, namely INFLUENCE and IMPACT. On both counts, it would seem as if the norms of the non-Christian world have influenced and impacted more heavily on the church than the other way round. The church has been eager to twist her values and norms to fit her environment on for instance such social issues as abortion, homosexuality (with homosexual bishops), transgender rights, lax sexuality, universalism and flamboyant display of wealth at the expense of ministry to support the needy and poor. The message of the Lord to His Church is to repent and do her original works as He spoke to the church in Ephesus to return to her first works, or else her candlestick would be removed (Rev. 2: 4-5). If Ephesus is a part of today's modern-day Turkey, it seems that this warning was not heeded. We shall revisit the Lord's messages to another church in the book of Revelations.

The question must therefore be raised as to why has the church abandoned her role as a witness for the Lord and become passive, unable to meet her mandate to be a spokesperson for God (Is. 43.10, Acts 1.8)? The church performed this role admirably in the past with definite improvements and progress around in global economy and politics. Even unbelievers around the world commended these in their writings (Weber 1958, Freston 2009). This reticence of the church as argued above has limited her influence and impact in the society generally but especially in the public policy arena. God is indeed using this pandemic to call the church both to repent so she can be His voice again.

There would of course be diverse explanations to the question of why the church lost her voice which was once persuasive. One reason canvassed in this presentation is the loss of focus and therefore of purity and power. The Lord Jesus Christ knew that the church must be holy to exercise power. The route to these two is via a strong commitment to His word—which He made clear was all about Him, the Word. (Jn 5. 39, 1.1-4). He therefore commanded the disciples to wait in Jerusalem after His departure until they received power from on high (Acts 1: 5-8). The power is fuelled by holiness or obedience to the Lord (Acts 5.32, Heb. 1.9). As His return draws near, the Lord seems to be using the present pandemic to remind the church to seek again His Power and Presence, which only purity of heart in single-minded obedience makes possible (Heb.12 14). These two make the church relevant and impactful if we do not lose our focus. The power and gifts of the Holy Spirit and fruit usually go together. The Lord Jesus expects the church to return to these as His second coming draws near. His predictions on His second coming was closely followed by the parable of the Ten Virgins (Mt. 25: 1-13). This parable teaches that up to one half of Christians who profess to be expecting His return would be disappointed. And this because they lacked the extra oil which would become essential for survival in the last days—as the forces of evil coalesce and grow stronger by the day (2 Tim. 3:1-5; 4: 1-5). The story of the Redeemed Christian Church of God may provide some insights to the above depositions.

4) SIX DECADES OF RCCG

Most of my listeners are likely to have heard that the RCCG was started in 1952 by a semi-illiterate man with whom the Lord gave three assignments. First, he was to start a church which would be patterned on His word. Second, this church would be in all parts of the world before His Son returns to earth. Thirdly, this church must be a model church that is filled with His power based on the covenantal blessings. Hence the motto of the church became: Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today and forever. Heb. 13.8. It is important to point out that this man had been in the established churches of his time before the Lord called him to a life of holiness and teaching of holy living.

It is widely recognized that against all odds this church passed the first two stages. The founder succeeded in starting the denomination focused on the word of God with strong aspirations to purity and power. But this denomination could not move outside of the southwestern part of the founding country, Nigeria. The quality of the leadership

and followership was high in terms of single-minded devotion to the word and the demonstration of God's power. In the second phase, the successor to the founder, who is the current leader has taken the denomination to over 197 countries of the world. The denomination is now poised to move into the third and final phase of her ministry, to prepare the denominational members and the world around them for the soon coming of the Savior. The focus on the word still exists but there is a widespread understanding that this denomination would require a fresh touch of God's fire especially in reaching out to the younger and new generation with the message of purity and power. In the meantime, the single-handed devotion of the church to evangelism, fasting and prayers etc have borne great fruit with huge increases in the numbers of the rank and file. Many lives have been transformed spiritually, morally, economically and politically. Several of the church leaders are in high positions in the country. Even non-members who wish to run for the highest offices flock to the church for blessings by the leadership. Other denominations have also proliferated in the country and all over Africa the renewing influence of the Holy Spirit is felt. However, the challenge remains on how to transform this spiritual power to leverage positive social and economic change.

5) PROSPERITY RISKS

As with ancient Israel, historically, success in financial, economic status of the churches have led to the abandonment of deeper spirituality. This might explain the weakness of the collective or universal church today: undermined by underlying weaknesses such as —disunity, apostasy, flamboyance and distractions of money etc The latter is particularly pernicious because the Lord made clear that mammon constituted the only viable alternative idol. Moreover, the Lord promised and to make available to His church all that is needed to prosecute the work of ministry if focus on the word, purity and power is sustained (Lk. 10: 4-9)..Moreover, the Lord's message to the last church addressed in Revelation, Laodecia rested heavily on this matter (Rev. 2: 14-19). It is significant that this church has all the trappings of the modern church today:

- It has lost her fire and is now lukewarm—neither hot nor cold.
- It has been economically successful and believes herself to be rich.to have arrived, having need of nothing
- Christ's counsel to her is to buy gold refined in the fire...that is the real wealth which is the freshness of God's Spirit and power. The Old and New Testaments have demonstrated that the superiority of spiritual over and above anything material (2 Kgs 5. 15-16, Acts 3: 6-7).

The above may explain why the voice of the global church is weak today. The Lord then calls on the church (not unbelievers) to open the doors of our hearts to Him so we can experience the power of His spirit as revealed in the gifts and fruit (1 Cor. 12. 7-12, Eph. 4. 7-11, Gal. 5: 22-23). The Apostle Paul asserts that these are the marks of those who carry spiritual authority in the Lord's church. (2 Cor. 12.12).

6) CONCLUSION

In conclusion, through this global pandemic, the Lord has given us in the global community, an opportunity to rethink our relationships to one another. For us in the church, the Lord is asking us to revisit our commitments towards the following:

- 1) We must change our Message and emphasis first to the church and then to the world.
- 2) Our message to the Church should seek to:
 - a) Prepare God's people for the imminent coming of His Son. - when the people (true & genuine Christians) are conscious of the imminence of the coming of Jesus, it will propel them to live right, & to take evangelism & soul winning sin God's power seriously.
 - b) Church leaders need to be encouraged to move from 'Survival' to 'Revival' mode. In Survival mode, they do all in order to service their ministries, their expensive, lavish, flamboyant life-styles! They are subtly using God to achieve these (but they forget that the All-knowing, All-seeing God wants us to prioritize building His kingdom and then He would add to us all that is needed for effective and abundant ministry!
 - c) The Pandemic has also highlighted the significance of the church to know more about natural and spiritual immunity available to God's people –through nature, the blood of the Lamb and the power of God that destroys yokes. (Rev. 12.11, Lk. 1: 40-41; 16.17).
 - d) The Pandemic quarantined Church Leaders so we can hear from the Lord and change the manner in which we conduct His business –to fit the imperatives of the new 21st century world—e.g. digital communications and online delivery of sermons and ministrations.
 - e) Leaders who refuse to hear what the Spirit of the Lord is saying would be ready to be replaced by many "Joshuas-in-waiting"! (See also Heb 12:5-12); Rom 14:12; Rev 10:10-12).

The World needs to hear the voice of the church again in three important areas:

1. **Through our acts of Charity:** Christianity triumphs where it is able to provide help to suffering people everywhere irrespective of their nationality, race or creed. The success of Christian missionaries globally attests to this...their work especially in the fields of health and education gave them the necessary entrance to all parts of the world. This is one area where we should be able to partner to provide an alternative voice to the government and the secular world, with a focus on the message of redemption and condemnation of sin in all its forms.
2. **Charisma:** The Demonstrations of God's power and fruits of His Holy Spirit especially in the face of the diseases that ravage the lives of the people in every country. We have now seen that sickness is real everywhere. And science does not

always have all the answers. In fact, it is the answers from the word of God which we have not taught that the world needs to hear.

3. ***Providing leadership in the seven mountains of culture***: The most crucial being in governance. As events in the United States has shown this would never happen except, we are ready to put our differences behind us and work together across our denominational barriers as God's people. The seven mountains are: RELIGION, FAMILY, EDUCATION, GOVERNMENT, MEDIA, ARTS, BUSINESS.

A particular opportunity that exists for the church of Jesus is to provide the alternative positive news –on COVID-19 --who are those surviving and why? This positive news is a void that the church of God must fill to bring hope to the hopeless, devoid of the partisan intrigues.

It would be interesting to get participants address the above-mentioned issues in responding to the challenge of what the Lord is saying to His church at this point in time.

REFERENCES (To Be provided).

Dele Olowu

Carlos Mraida

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

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

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

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 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.

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].

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 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 breach 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 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 world-wide 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

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

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 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.

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.

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

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, 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 communication with community, 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 "see" the worship on line, while they eat, or

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].

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 docetistic 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.

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 underestimated 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 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

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

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

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

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.

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 our 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 criptoglesia* [The birth of the cryptochurch].

S. J. Komanapalli

What is God saying to the Church through this pandemic time?

A pastoral approach

My dear brothers and sisters,

Grace and peace to you all. It is truly my privilege to present a few thoughts and observations regarding the topic.

As we journey through this Covid-19 crisis, my prayer is that it will be well with you, your family and congregation.

Recently, some Pastors asked for my viewpoint on the present pandemic. Some of the questions asked included how I view what is happening, implications for the Church, and some practical applications for the local Pastor.

Foundational framework

- 1) I do not believe that we are in a time of punishment from God. If so, it would have been the end of the world. However, nothing happens without Him allowing it. This has historically happened before with previous pandemics. The growing population, pollution, hygiene or lack of hygiene, poverty-all contribute to sickness and at some point, something mutates and causes an outbreak.
- 2) I believe God is using this time as a reset of many things especially in the church
- 3) God is stripping away some of the accumulated trappings of the church that have drawn the eyes to the event and place rather than true worship of the Creator.
 - a) Isaiah 17:7-8 *Man will have respect for the Holy One.* We love our Maker, but many times it is based on what we expect or fashion Him to be. Respect is when we see Him as He is and surrender ourselves to Him. The church has tried to fashion Christ in their image out of love but must learn to love Him as He is out of respect. We must come back to the place of worshipping in *Spirit and Truth* (John 4:24).
 - b) As the world comes to a standstill and without answers, God reminds us that He is our healer whether it is instant/miraculous or through medical science. (Jeremiah 33:6)
 - c) As sources of our income diminish or disappear, God reminds us that He is our provider and we should turn our trust to him. (Genesis 22:14)
- 4) God is using this isolation to rebuild the personal altar and the family altar. We have focused so much on the Church/public altar that we have lost the foundational significance of the individual altar and family altar.

- 5) This reset will lay down a foundation that will lead to global revival.

The reality of the situation lies in the fact we have never been down this road before. Nevertheless, that also gives us the direction where to go first. The Lord spoke through Joshua in Joshua 3:4 to follow after the Ark *“that you may know the way by which you must go, for you have not passed this way before”*. We must seek His direction and guidance.

For Men and Women of God, this puts us in a particular quandary. For we must accept what we are knowledgeable about and what we are not. We must not be afraid to defer to science and not be quick to jump to conclusions or buy into conspiracies (Isaiah 8:11-12). We must be Men and Women who calm the fears of the people and point to a God who is still sovereign and in control. We must bring comfort, encouragement and hope. This is particularly important for those who would suffer from mental health issues. Science is a gift from God and we should not fear it but use it to benefit our people.

The Lord is calling His Church to be His voice once again (Isaiah 40:1) To be the voice of calm, healing, comfort, hope, encouragement, salvation and deliverance. Do not promote fear but declare the presence of God.

Practical applications

- 1) Show people that our hope is in Christ. Acknowledge that their worry or fear is legitimate and normal in times like these. However, show how we overcome when we put our trust in Christ

Preach Christ!
In despair--preach hope
In fear—preach courage
In sickness—preach healing
In mourning—preach comfort
In danger—preach protection
In panic and anxiety—preach calm and peace
Preach Jesus!

- 2) Do not be afraid to admit that we do not have all the answers, yet we trust in God who does have all the answers. (Psalm 95:6-7)
- 3) Acknowledge we are in a season of struggle but as we have overcome things before, God will bring us through again. Tell people to list out past victories in their lives.
- 4) Be practical and follow practical suggestions on daily living within framework of health protocols, governmental protocols, etc. Inform your people of these things.

- 5) Steer them away from conspiracies and stories that stoke fear and restlessness. Steer them to the Word of God.
- 6) Encourage our people to be part of the solution, whether encouraging one another, helping with resources, feeding, etc. The more people engage, the less they will feel helpless.
- 7) Try new technologies, strategies to bring the Gospel to all. This is a time to try new things that you can use in the church later when things come back to normal. Use technology to be in contact with and communicate with your church people.
- 8) Do not try to be everyone's Pastor or leader. Lead those you have been called to lead. Let others lead their flocks. Do not allow yourself to be caught up in controversies or criticisms over tradition of Worship ritual, Baptism or Holy Communion.
- 9) Use this time to build up your family. Enjoy the rebuilding of relationships and fostering them into the future.

"Stand strong, remain faithful, and be of good courage."

"We will get through this together."

S. J. Komanapalli

Christian Romo

**Letter to God's servants involved
in ministry in the Church**

This note is addressed first of all to pastors and leaders who are involved in the Lord's work in our country, in the hopes that God will awaken us to do as he wants, and lead us to do things his way and not ours, understanding that the church is divine in nature and that the design belongs to its creator.

There is no doubt that we have all been surprised by what has taken place during the last six months, which is something that obviously leads us to a deep reflection to try to understand what is happening at this time. I believe that no one has been indifferent to the events that have occurred so quickly and explosively. This has given rise to a tremendous change in the world; in other words, we are now living in a different world.

What we can affirm is that the only one who has not been surprised by these events is God, which is due to the simple fact that he is the Lord of creation and of history, as expressed in the Scriptures: "The earth is the Lord's, and all it contains, the world, and those who dwell in it." In the light of this scenario, there can be many interpretations, and one must be careful when judging other people as well as the situation itself. In fact, more questions exist than answers. But we must begin to examine ourselves and ask: Is this God's judgment? Is it a warning or a wake-up call?

The tendency is to look at the world and point out its sin, but it is necessary to turn our gaze inward and see if we are responding to God as He expects. I think we must understand God's concern for his church. He has spoken to us many times in different ways. There are several very serious prophecies that have been spoken to the church in Chile. We hear them but do not act. Now the Lord has allowed two startling events that have us concerned, the social outbreak and the coronavirus; notwithstanding, few are the steps we have taken in this regard.

Something that the Lord has spoken to us over and over again concerns unity. One of the most powerful elements to fight evil and attract God's blessing is this: being united as one. However, what is actually happening? What we do and how we act is this: we share with some fellow servants for a few moments, very diplomatically, as almost everything is on the surface. I believe that the time has come to put our little crowns before the King and our little kingdoms under his authority, and then, with an open heart, open up to get to know each other and help one another. We need to spend time together. I'm not thinking about the amount of time, but the quality of time we spend in the presence of God, seeking his direction without any urgent, pending

agendas. I am the first to repent of having been careless in seeking stronger and deeper relationships at the church level, especially in ministerial relationships. How many of those reading this note are being shepherded? With whom do you open your heart when you have difficulties? Because apart from being a pastor, you are husband, father, grandfather, citizen, etc. Dear servants of God, let's please wake up to this reality.

The problem is not in the flock; we who guide the flock are the problem. God, with one stroke, has changed the scheme of things. What we once held as a priority has already been displaced. Gender identity, homosexual marriage, abortion, etc., no longer matter much. It's not that they don't matter; it's that God turned the pointer in another direction. Today many have to worry about where they will spend eternity, together with inner related issues, i.e., broken relationships, unnecessary offenses, personal and collective criticism.

Oh, dear brothers, today our Father is giving us the opportunity to make amends. He is a Father of relationships and has entrusted us with the ministry of reconciliation. I know that we have some religious attachments that tend to curtail sincere and deep relationships. In the name of the Lord of the church, let us overcome institutionalism and take steps towards a family-style life in the Body of Christ. This does not have to do with whether we are from the same group or not. What we must be clear on is that we are all part of the only Church that exists, no matter what our personal or collective style is. Life is what matters...your life.

Another thing that occurs on a somewhat superficial level is mutual honor and recognition. I don't know if this is a Chilean or universal ailment. The opposite of honor and recognition is competition and comparison, also criticism, etc. These are just a few things that we must overcome. May the Lord forgive our individualistic way of life, and may we desire true fellowship.

I pray the Holy Spirit will bring us to a deep and real repentance so that the desired revival for which we have long awaited may truly come.

Everything that is taking place indicates that we must react and take the steps that correspond to each of us. As I write this note, I do so with the fear of the Lord, looking at myself and keeping in mind every servant of God who reads this note.

This has nothing to do with any locality in particular, rather it is for all the servants of God, wherever they are in our country, obeying that which the Lord tells us to do.

Cristian Romo Jiménez
Servant of the Lord
Apostolic Ministry

A letter from Cristian Romo Jiménez in times of global change. April 2020.

Cristian Romo Jiménez

Jorge Himitian

The Church in the post-pandemic world

This pandemic is "forcing" us to rethink many things. There is much uncertainty and few assurances. More questions than answers.

The world has changed, maybe definitely

The sooner we understand it, the better we will adapt to the post-pandemic world. Actually, we still don't know what this post-pandemic world will be like.

Presbyterian Pastor Ricardo Agreste from Brazil, in a digital dissertation stated: The world as we knew it no longer exists.

What would have happened in the next three years, happened in three weeks. Our churches represent the organizations most resistant to change, because its leadership does not know how to differentiate between essence and form.

He concludes with this statement: This pandemic should produce a Sabbath in us. A halt for deep reflection... The church can come back from this pandemic not only bigger but better.

The words of the prophet Jeremiah seem pertinent to me:

"This is what the Lord says: 'Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls. But you said, 'We will not walk in it.'"
(Jeremiah 6.16).

Ministerial discernment for these days

These are days of quietness, of reflection, of prayer, of hearing God; especially those of us who are the pastors. We need to open our minds and hearts, and, in the face of these new circumstances, open ourselves to the changes that God, through His Word, wants us to make in our ministerial strategy.

For this we need discernment.

- Between what is absolute and what is relative
- Between what is immutable and what is variable
- Between what is indispensable and what is expendable
- Between what is essential and what is secondary
- Between what is permanent and what is circumstantial

Within those things that are relative and secondary, there are undoubtedly good, useful and pleasant things, but they are not indispensable, and others that we continue practicing as a custom or tradition. We will do well to review them to evaluate their usefulness.

The versatility of the church in history

The Lord's church has proven throughout the centuries to be very versatile. Adaptable to any time and circumstance. The church is all terrain. For long periods the church was persecuted, with a very high number of martyrs and lots of suffering. In those difficult times it was impossible to have a public or congregational meeting. It was the "underground" church, the persecuted church. But that church never abandoned that which is absolute: the Word, prayer, evangelism, teaching, discipleship, love, good works, fellowship ...

The church in its first 300 years never had "temples". It met in homes. And when possible, in public places. It was the church's best time! It would never have occurred to them to call a building "church". They had no pulpits nor altars. They had no stages nor sound equipment. But they had the essentials, the indispensable, what cannot and must not be lacking: the Holy Spirit and the Word of God.

What is being a church?

In most Christians today consider that being a church we need to have a "temple", pulpit, cross, benches, musical instruments, a platform, sound equipment. Both Catholics and Evangelicals make the blunder of calling the halls in which we meet "a church".

Why does the church exist? Why is it on the earth? We must redefine the nature and purpose of the church in light of the New Testament.

Jesus never said to his disciples, "Go and build temples in all nations." Nor did he say: "Go and make meetings ...

"But, 'Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them ... and teaching them to keep all the things that I have commanded you ...' (Matthew 28.19-20).

Jesus tells us today, just like in the beginning:

"Go into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16.15).

The fields are white for the harvest. This is a 'kairos' of God that we cannot squander.

A new sensitivity has emerged in humanity. Not in all, but in many.

There is a new awareness of our human FRAGILITY. And this can be a prelude to humility; a very favorable condition for hearing the gospel.

There is a new awareness of the UNPREDICTABILITY of life. We have no agenda. This can also lead us to humility and a search for assurance, which is only found in God.

Today we are more aware of our IMPOTENCE. Aware that there are forces and factors that we cannot control. Not with money, not with science, not with technology, not with laws. Yet another feeling that can lead us to humility.

Although not openly talked about, there is a new awareness of the closeness of DEATH. This generates fear, anxiety, need to hear a message of hope and salvation.

This new sensitivity in mankind—I reiterate, not in all, but in many—can be a great open door for evangelism and the conversion of millions throughout the world.

"See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut..."

(Revelation 3:7-8)

The sieve of God

We know and believe that for those who love God all things work together for good (Romans 8.28)

The Lord allowed all this to put us in a sieve. And what a sieve! The purpose of the sieve is to separate the chaff from the wheat. The necessary from the superfluous, the absolute from the relative. There is a lot of straw and stubble in the church today. Paul says that the church should be built with gold, silver, and precious stones. But he warns that some build with wood, hay and stubble. (1 Corinthians 3.11-13).

All of this has served us well in order to evaluate what kind of church we are building. Will what we are building pass the test of fire? The fire terminates everything banal, with its superficiality, religiosity, carnality. Everything that is wood, hay, and stubble burns quickly.

But fire also has another function: it purifies gold, silver and precious stones. We will come out better from all this! At least, this is what God has proposed, what he is "scheming".

I don't want to waste the last years of my life building what the fire will consume. I want to invest in that which will last for eternity. What is it? Win the lost and build them up in the image of Jesus.

May God help us. Amen.

What word do we have for nations, and especially for their leaders?

The pandemic forces nations to stop and rethink the path that the world has taken globally in recent centuries on a social, economic and ethical level.

ECONOMY

Mankind needs to rethink the current economic system at the global and national levels. This pandemic has exposed the fragility and structural injustice of the world economic system. The gap between rich and poor is widening in the vast majority of the nations of the world. The current economic system is based on individualism and personal ambition. The basis of social coexistence must be the maxim of Jesus: "You will love your neighbor as yourself." And an important aspect of social coexistence is the economy. A new economy based on work and love of neighbor is necessary. The development of a large economic reform based on a social ethic is urgent.

ECOLOGY

We, as mankind, need to assume our responsibility, since we are administrators and caretakers of our common home, the planet earth. It is insane to continue as we are. It would be like making a big hole in the boat that we are all in. Again the love of money surfaces. Selfish ambition blinds us and drives us insane. What more do we need before we change? We need state policies both at the national and international levels, and education at all levels of society.

HEALTH

Access to good health care cannot be the privilege of those with the highest income. Those who suffer from an illness, those involved in an accident, those who are born with a congenital condition, are not to blame for their misery. Medicine cannot be a lucrative business but a social service. Thank God that during the current pandemic most nations have prioritized the care of those infected regardless of their economic possibilities. Shouldn't this always be so? All nations must develop "social medicine" projects.

MANKIND (The human being)

Postmodernism has discovered that man is not just a rational animal as modernity maintained. He is a social, affective, emotional, relational, spiritual. Man, in his essence is a spiritual being, and as such, a transcendent and moral being. If we underestimate the spiritual and moral aspects, we are destroying man, and therefore humanity.

THE FAMILY

The attack on marriage and family has been fierce in the past 50 years. There does not exist, according to any point of view, an integration of society wiser and healthier than the "traditional" family: the normal, natural, stable marriage formed by a man and a woman. It is painful to see so many single mothers, and even worse the "inventions" of unnatural marriages, even though in some countries they are legal. To destroy the family and its values is to destroy society. If a change of course is not made, the future social structure will be catastrophic.

WHAT GOD SAYS TO THE NATIONS**Isaiah 24**

"¹See, the Lord is going to lay waste the earth and devastate it; he will ruin its face and scatter its inhabitants! ... ⁴The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers, the heavens languish with the earth. ⁵The earth is defiled by its people; they have disobeyed the laws...

Isaiah 45.21-24

"Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked: Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear. They will say of me, 'In the Lord alone are deliverance and strength.'"

TRABAJO PARA LOS TALLERES POR GRUPOS:

1. Let's make a list of the things that we consider absolute and indispensable in the church, and another list of the things that are relative, variable and dispensable. Boths lists should be as complete as possible. (anexo 5).
2. What should the main strategies of the church be during the pandemic?

3. Being aware of our responsibility to be the light of the world, in what ways can we impact the society in which we live?

Jorge Himitian

Jorge Himitian

God and the Coronavirus

INTRODUCTION

Incredible as it seems, a virus as small as COVID-19 has put all the nations of the world in check. Health, the economy, the stock market, the price of oil. Tourism, factories, commerce, cultural activities, sports, congresses and even church meetings have been paralyzed. It has locked everyone in their homes, emptied the streets, and is "forcing" us to rethink many things. There is uncertainty, and many questions arise.

I want to order my words around FOUR QUESTIONS:

1. HAVE VIRUSES BEEN CREATED BY GOD?

The first thing I must clarify is that God is not the author of any disease or death. God is the author of life, of good health. God did not create evil, or sin, or death, or disease. The Bible, in Romans 5.12, states the following:

Therefore, as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin; and so death passed unto all men, for that all sinned.

The first man, despite having been warned by God, by sinning opened the door to the devil and death. And, therefore, to all diseases and pests.

Jesus said this about the devil: *"He was a murderer from the beginning"* (John 8.44). And also: *"The thief cometh not, but that he may steal, and kill, and destroy: I came that they may have life, and may have it abundantly"* (John 10.10).

When man sinned, there was an alteration in creation; not only spiritual but also biological and genetic alteration in nature. Everything became infected because of man's sin. The author of this "degeneration" was Satan, but it was man who enabled him, because of his disobedience to God.

Therefore, every virus is a degenerative mutation due to man's rebellion against God.

2. IS THE CORONAVIRUS A JUDGMENT OF GOD?

On Saturday, March 21, the day after the President of Argentina, Dr. Alberto Fernández, wisely decreed the cessation of all activities at the national level, three pastors and two Catholic priests were invited by the Minister of Human Development and Habitat of the City of Buenos Aires, including members of her team, to discuss how to coordinate the interaction between the City Government and the city's Catholic and Evangelical churches in these pandemic days.

Upon entering the building, an official took our personal data. When I was alone with her, she asked me: "Do you belong other ministry?" I replied: "No. We are pastors. " "Ah! Pastors?" And, after a brief pause, she added: "God must be angry with us and with the world. Right? Because there is a lot of evil in the world. What do you think, pastor?" I replied: "I agree with you. But, we can also see it in another way. God loves the world so much, and so He allows this pandemic for us to repent and change".

Returning to our question: Is the coronavirus a judgment of God?
I want to explain it like this:

In the Bible we find two kinds of judgments:

- 1) Corrective trials or penalties (discipline)
- 2) Condemnatory trials (sentence or verdict)

In the Greek of the New Testament there are two different words:

- 1) Παιδεία (Paideia) = Corrective judgment or punishment
- 2) Κριμα (Krima) and Κρισις (Krisis) = Condemnatory judgment

Definitely, the coronavirus is not a condemnatory judgment for men, because, according to the Bible, that will happen to all of us after death.

Hebrews 9.27, declares: *"And inasmuch as it is appointed unto men once to die, and after this cometh judgment.* Here the word judgment is *krisis*.

Romans 2.3: *"And reckonest thou this, O man, who judgest them that practise such things, and doest the same, that thou shalt escape the judgment of God?* Here the word judgment is *krisis*.

In both verses it refers to the CONDEMNING JUDGMENT.

But let's look at these other biblical texts in which God speaks of CORRECTIVE PUNISHMENT. Let's see some examples:

Isaiah 26.9b says: *"... for when thy judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness"*.

Isaiah 26.16: *"Lord, in tribulation they looked for you; They poured out prayer when you punished them"*.

Some, in the face of adversity, react well. They allow themselves to be corrected by the Lord's punishment. Blessed!

Others, unfortunately, do not respond well. They cannot be corrected. As the Bible mentions in the book of Amos, chapter 4, God says to the people of Israel:

V.6: *"But I gave you also cleanness of teeth in all your cities. And lack of bread in all your places, yet you have not returned to Me, declares the Lord"*.

V.7-8: *"Furthermore, I withheld the rain from you ... yet you have not returned to Me,"*

V.9: *"I smote you with scorching wind and mildew; and the caterpillar was devouring your many gardens and vineyards, fig trees and olive trees; yet you have not returned to Me, declares the Lord"*.

All these punishments or judgments had a corrective purpose; for the people to repent of their sins and turn to God. But Israel did not repent, and was exposed to God's damning judgment. Therefore, he concludes by saying:

V.12: *"... because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel."*

The New Testament teaches us the same about God's corrective punishment.

Hebrews 12.6: *"For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines" (paideia) ...*

Revelation 3.19: *"As many as I love, I reprove and chasten (paideia): be zealous therefore, and repent"*.

So, in my understanding, the coronavirus is not God's judgment on the sins of humanity, but God's corrective punishment for all nations to repent of their wickedness and sins and turn to God.

The book of Revelation (chapter 8) reveals that in the end of times there will be many calamities and terrible cataclysms on earth. Who will send them? God or the devil?

Does it matter? The important thing is that they will happen. We know that God is in control of everything. Whether corrective judgments come from God or calamities produced by Satan, they will always be under the permissive will of God. Why does He send them, or allows them? For all people, all families of all nations to repent and return to God!

But, sadly, Revelation 9.20-21 says: *“And the rest of mankind, who were not killed with these plagues, repented not of the works of their hands, that they should not worship demons, and the idols of gold, and of silver, and of brass, and of stone, and of wood; which can neither see, nor hear, nor walk: and they repented not of their murders, nor of their sorceries, nor of their fornication, nor of their thefts”.*

God's intention is to correct us and not to destroy us. But he who does not repent when receives God's corrective judgment will one day have to face the condemnatory judgment, that is the final judgment (Revelation 20.11-15).

3. WHAT DO WE HAVE TO REPENT OF?

There have always been sins, but when humanity goes beyond the cup, God in his mercy, sometimes, dramatically intervenes. Intervene today out of love for this generation and future generations. To correct the wrong direction in which we are going.

When has there been more injustice in the nations than in our day? The gap between the rich and poor is widening in the vast majority of the world's nations. Instead of producing the welfare for all, the technological revolution of the 20th and 21st centuries has increased social injustice.

Let's think only about many countries. Can a God of love remain indifferent to the fact that there are millions of children and adults living in poverty and hunger.

How does God feel before the corruption of rulers, businessmen and unionists? How do you feel in the face of so much violence in homes, in bowling alleys, in stadiums, on the streets, in the face of so many homicides, femicides and crimes?

How does God feel when he sees that so many people intentionally ignore him, and blatantly defend gay marriage, abortion, divorce, free sex, living as a couple without getting married, and so many other abnormalities?

Can God remain indifferent to the vile drug trafficking business that is destroying millions of our own youth people and children, causing to the pain of so many mothers who, with tears and helplessness, have to bury their children?

We need to repent of all that and much more, and return to God. Each one of us needs to convert, and each one knows well what sins to repent of.

We have prioritized material things over the spiritual; the house over the family; pleasure over duty; comfort instead of inner peace; selfishness instead of love. We have become intoxicated through movies, television and social networks, instead of filling ourselves with the word of God.

We need to return to God. We need to be a holy nation that loves God, keeps his commandments, and loves our neighbor.

4. WHAT DO WE LEARN FROM THIS CRISIS?

There are multiple purposes: for nations, for governments, for society, for businessmen, etc. But now I want to limit myself to the disciples of Christ.

- Let's improve our prayer time being alone with God. On March 10 and 11, I was together with about 10 pastors gathered in a retreat. God gave us Isaiah chapter 26 as a word for these days. Specially verse 20 says: *"Come, my people, enter into your rooms and close your doors behind you; hide for a little while until indignation runs its course"*. This coincides with the words of Jesus: *"But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret..."* (Matthew 6.6). Now we have no excuses. But the important thing is that by the end of the quarantine time we had learned to prioritize private prayer, as we did in our best times.

- Let's prioritize time at home. Let's improve dealing with each other. Let's be kind, helpful, companions, friends. Let's set aside a time to be with the children. Let's restore the family altar. Let's read the Word together and pray as a family. Let's not use the cell phone at the table, let's value talking with each other.

- Let's show more solidarity to everyone. Let's greet the neighbors with love. Let us love and serve our neighbor. Let's be creative in building bridges of friendship. Let's value each other's work. Let's praise the good things we see in others. Let's be grateful.

- Let us speak very naturally of Christ to everyone. We need to overcome shyness and individualism. Let's open our houses and invite the neighbors to pray and read the Bible (of course, when the quarantine is over. Meanwhile we can call them on the cell phone). Let us pray for the sick. We believe that God is close to each one, and that he works miracles.
- Let's rethink the church. Let's strengthen small groups. Let's devise new strategies for evangelization, prayer and communion. The church is very versatile; It can work in any time and circumstances. And grow.
- Let's be generous with those who go through financial needs. Difficult times may come. Let's avoid superfluous expenses. Let's save as much as possible to have something to share with those who need it.
- Let's pray that God will use the coronavirus to bring about a worldwide revival, beginning in our own home, neighborhood, city, and nation. We believe that wonderful days will come. Days of salvation and power. Christ will be glorified in our nation and in the world. And millions will be saved!

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