

SPIRITUAL REFLECTION - APRIL 2020 Message Concerning The Pandemic

Along with all the directives and information that have already been sent out by our Vincentian leadership, and on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the martyrdom of St. Oscar Romero, I would like to add a brief reflection on this present Corona virus Covid-19 crisis.

Apparently, the word “crisis” in Chinese has two possible meanings – “escape” or “opportunity,” and it is up to us to determine which of these two meanings will characterize our response. I know it is the latter, which invites us to explore how best to realize that option.

The spiritual writer Jean-Pierre de Caussade, author of *Abandonment to Divine Providence*, advises living in the present moment, accepting obstacles with love and humility, and encountering God in our day-to-day activities. He also asserts everything which happens is in some sense God’s will, perhaps best expressed by the certitude that God can and does turn everything to the good for those who love God.

Certainly, God does not will any evil such as this pandemic, but the fact that God permits it to happen, is an occasion to seek out and find the doors of opportunity this holds for us, the deeper lessons God can and will teach us through it, the wisdom and character God wants us to attain and develop in the midst of it.

A first response would be to do what we are already doing – encouraging each other to do what we can to mitigate the spread of this virus, even as we continue to carry out the charitable works to the degree we can. As well, we can continue to learn more about this virus and how it can be contained.

That word, “contained” applies to us as well. With more and more lock-downs and self-isolation, we are all experiencing, to a greater or lesser degree, a sense of being contained. That is not new – throughout history, our ancestors in the faith went through the experience of being contained, beginning with Noah’s family in the ark, the Israelite’s centuries of slavery in Egypt, their forty years in the desert, Jesus’ own three days in the tomb. More recently, thousands of refugees are contained in camps or huddled at borders, and many are slaves of human trafficking. Now, we are all thrown into solidarity with so many others, and challenged to find the meaning and purpose is all of this, especially in the light of the resurrection which we may not be able to celebrate publicly this year.

May I suggest we see this time of containment as an opportunity for sabbath, a time of rest and renewal, of connecting more deeply with God, one another,

ourselves, and even all of God's creation? It can be a time of deeper prayer, more in-depth reading and more profound reflection on the meaning of life. Some beautiful prayers for us as Vincentians have been disseminated – let us pray them from the heart. This may also be a time of spending more time with God's word, that can take on more poignant meaning at times like this, such as the psalm for today as I write this: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea" (Psalm 46).

Our task is to have eyes that see the good God is drawing out of this crisis. One I have immediately noticed is that the narrative around physician assisted suicide (softened by the term MAID) has almost dropped out of sight. Everyone is now desperately trying to keep seniors safe and alive, not trying to end their lives! Another is the creativity surfacing in finding ways to reach out to others. Fathers Susai Jesu and Mark Blom at Sacred Heart Church of the First Peoples in Edmonton were quick to put their celebration of the Eucharist on Facebook (the first time in 107 years there was no congregation), as are many others. For my part, I have begun to video and post my daily homilies on that same platform.

There are many other examples: frontline workers risking their lives to care for the sick; the phenomenon of "care-mongering" has arisen; flash-mobs on balconies are creating new relationships out of neighbors who were strangers, even if at a distance. The challenge is for us as Vincentians to add to that list – to find creative ways to safely carry on the charitable work we do, as best we can.

I close with the words of Ken Thorson, Provincial of the Oblates, in his message to us: "In these strange days of social distancing, increasing anxiety, and things changing quickly, the practice of our spiritual traditions can lead us to a place of deeper communion with God, with one another, and a place of deeper compassion for others struggling to trust in their neighbor and hope for the future." May we also be inspired by the example of St. Oscar Romero, who gave his life fearlessly trying to bring greater justice to the social and political crisis he was facing in his day.

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