



The Church facing the Covid-19 emergency

Cardinal Michael Czerny SJ

‘The Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel’, as we read in *Gaudium et spes*. How do we interpret the signs of these extraordinary times? Cardinal Michael Czerny SJ asks us to consider whether, in our responses to the coronavirus pandemic, we are embracing the ‘saving logic’ of the gospel and all of its opportunities, or resigning ourselves to a ‘substitute logic’.

The Covid-19 emergency is testing the physical, mental and social endurance of entire nations. The contagion has spread very quickly and globally, causing a deep health crisis and bringing the world economy to its knees. Like a magnifying glass, it has also revealed the weaknesses of social organisation and the vulnerability of many people. Think of families living in poverty, the elderly, prisoners, the homeless, migrants and asylum seekers, and victims of trafficking. Yet among them the Holy Father sees ‘an invisible army, fighting in the most dangerous trenches; an army whose only weapons are solidarity, hope, and community spirit, all revitalizing at a time when no one can save themselves alone.’¹

By the end of April, the coronavirus will have infected several million people around the world. It is teaching us harsh lessons, paid for with human lives. ‘It is not permissible that we write current and future history by turning our backs on the suffering of so many people.’ The ability to provide an adequate response to the pain and poverty of those who are marginalised and rendered ‘invisible’ will be a measure of the genuine, integral, sustainable development of our countries. This pandemic can only be resisted with the ‘antibodies of solidarity’.²



At the same time, we read what we are living with the eyes of faith. We return to the ever-timely invitation of the Second Vatican Council to attune our ears to the voice of God who speaks through human events and experiences (*Gaudium et spes*, §4). This focus on history, interpreted as the place where salvation happens, is one of the crucial themes of Francis’ teaching. From the

encyclical *Laudato si’* to the apostolic exhortations *Evangelii Gaudium*, *Gaudete et exsultate* and *Querida Amazonia*, the pontiff exhorts us to read ‘the signs of the times’ and shows us how.

These signs tell us that we are now at a sort of ‘crossroads’ – in Greek, *krisis*. There are two roads ahead of us, two different approaches to the situation.

One road would have us hold still, waiting for the epidemic to take its course – perhaps dulling our anxiety with ‘sooner or later this will pass’ – and just trying to remain afloat in the swamp of daily problems. Such resignation feeds on the need for security; its ‘substitute logic’ has us think only about how to adapt to the present annoyances and discomforts, perhaps finding a way to continue doing what we were doing before without contravening the restrictions imposed by the authorities.

The other road has us welcome this time, actively cultivating a vital relationship with Christ and creatively seeking those who especially need our help. To embrace the 'saving logic' of the gospel is to reach through uncertainty and grasp a renewed identity and mission as baptised Christians and missionary disciples. We can show (be!) the beautiful face of a Church at the service of our brother and sister, in solidarity with their suffering and open to their needs. This is a Church aware of being 'People of God' (*Lumen gentium*, §9), facing the present challenges with courage, placing her hope in Christ Jesus now and for the future.

News arriving daily from around the world speaks of a Church mobilising on more and more fronts. Many Catholics are among those who have rolled up their sleeves and do not hesitate to spend themselves completely. Countless initiatives of effective charity bear witness to God's love at work in hidden ways, like the yeast that leavens all the dough (Mt 13:33). Think of the many who keep delivering food, essential services, public security. Think of the many doctors and nurses, priests and religious who, risking their lives, remain on the front lines and stay close to the sick. Giving themselves 'to the end' (Jn 13:1), they offer a shining witness to the teachings and example of Jesus, reminding everyone that [care for the suffering takes precedence](#). At this moment it is the whole person who suffers and needs healing, and very many of them. Therefore prayer, which everyone can try to offer, is also indispensable.

Under these exceptional conditions, in this 'suspended' time like slow motion that is imposed on us all, we are being forced to slacken our frenetic rhythms, to change our habits, to invent new perspectives, criteria and responses. Quarantine has torn each person's usual web of relationships asunder. Solitude can be an uncomfortable surprise. The mounting death toll is deeply upsetting for those who have never really faced the mystery of their own death.

In coming to terms with themselves and their inner life, or seeking comfort and reassurance, or rediscovering the traditions in which they were raised, many have felt the need to seek God. This is a novel turn in an age when techno-scientific progress can take people away from religion.

An important step in seeking God is to embark on a serious review of one's life, as St Ignatius suggests in the [Spiritual Exercises](#).³ The certainties on which we have built our existence now seem shaky, and this allows questions of meaning to emerge: what did I live for? What will I live for? Am I capable of going beyond myself? Faith, which rattles the comfortably modern person, can slowly assist questions to emerge, while God is quick to respond.

The media can facilitate a welcome to new seekers and a rapprochement for those who have drifted away from the Church. Perhaps those lacking the courage to enter a church can today take advantage of opportunities online: to listen to the Word of God proclaimed and taught; to know the contents of the creed better; to join the Holy Father for an hour of adoration in a dramatically empty St Peter's Square; or to 'visit' one's own neighbourhood parish church. Of course, these offerings also serve the many faithful who very much miss the gathering and now take part in the celebrations and rites of the Church by following them from home.

At this moment predictions hold little value because there are too many variables at play, but embracing the present and guided by the Holy Spirit, we can discern what is essential. 'It is time to choose what matters and what passes, to separate what is necessary from what is not. It is the time to reset the course of life towards You, Lord, and towards others.'⁴

Cardinal Michael Czerny SJ is Under-Secretary of the Migrants and Refugees Section of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development.

¹ Pope Francis, 'Letter to the Popular Movements', 12 April 2020:

http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200412_lettera-movimentipopolari.html.

² Pope Francis, 'Un plan para resucitar', Vida Nueva, 17 April 2020:

<https://www.vidanuevadigital.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/UN-PLAN-PARA-RESUCITAR-PAPA-FRANCISCO-VIDA-NUEVA.pdf>

(Translation quoted in 'Pope: Let's not be afraid to build an alternative civilisation of love', *Independent Catholic News*, 17 April 2020:

<https://www.indcatholicnews.com/news/39382>).

³ Pope Francis has spoken of the important role that memory plays in the First Week of the Spiritual Exercises. See, for example: 'A Big Heart Open to God' (*Thinking Faith*, 19 September 2013:

https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20130919_1.htm); and Austen Ivereigh, 'Remembering our future: Pope Francis and the corona crisis' (*Thinking Faith*, 8 April 2020:

<https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/remembering-our-future-pope-francis-and-corona-crisis>).

⁴ Pope Francis, 'Extraordinary moment of prayer', 27 March 2020:

http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200327_omelia-epidemia.html.