



# Can Jesus raise our hope from the dead?

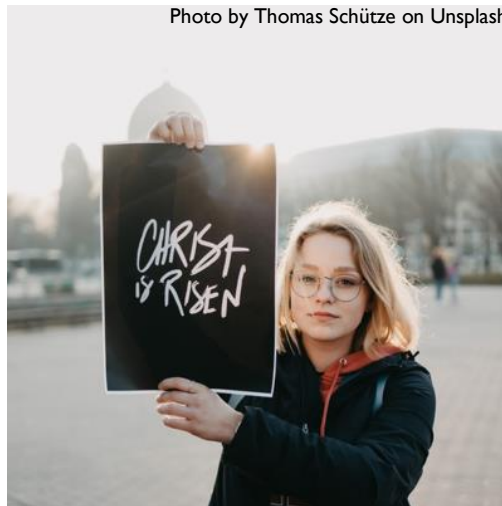
Cardinal Michael Czerny SJ

In the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, many people feel as if they have been living one long Lent since Ash Wednesday 2020, writes Cardinal Michael Czerny SJ, and are seeking joy in a restoration of ‘the old normal’, even though it was fraught with problems. But the joy that Easter brings, this and every year, is one of renewal and conversion, not of a return to ‘the way things were’.

Lent, with its calls to penitence and customs of privation, can feel long. It reflects the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness fasting and struggling with temptation at the beginning of his ministry (Mark 1:13). But for months it has felt as if Lent began on Ash Wednesday 2020. That was 26 February, and on 11 March the World Health Organization declared Covid-19 to be a pandemic. And that of course has been dragging on relentlessly for over 400 days until this Easter of 2021.

‘Last year we were more shocked,’ recalls Pope Francis, but ‘this year we are more sorely tried.’<sup>1</sup> From the beginning, the pandemic has been so hard on so many, and continues to weigh all of us down.

So if we are looking back on a truly trying Lent of 400+ days, how can we envisage and embrace an appropriate, a proportional and a timely Easter? Should this Easter not somehow be ten times ‘the length and width, height and depth’ (Ephesians 3:18) of an ordinary Easter?



Our first response might be: ‘Oh if only we could recover the Easter of 2019! If only we could go back to the old normal!’ But no. As Pope Francis insists, ‘after a crisis a person is not the same. We come out of it better, or we come out of it worse. This is our option.’<sup>2</sup> So, ‘the way things were’ is not a viable option.

‘The Easter message does not offer us a mirage or reveal a magic formula,’ says the pope. ‘It does not point to an escape from the difficult situation we are experiencing. The pandemic is still spreading, while the social and economic crisis remains severe, especially for the poor.’<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, we cannot help but feel disoriented and discouraged, not only by Covid-19 but even more by the economic, health, political and environmental problems, the long-standing and worsening injustices, that it keeps uncovering and magnifying. A sad and shameful ‘normal’ that we inherited from before Covid is the inability, as a global community of nations and pharmaceuticals, to assure equitable distribution of the vaccine.

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the Director-General of the World Health Organization, tweeted his echo of the Easter *Urbi et Orbi* message: 'I join His Holiness [Pope Francis] in his Easter Sunday appeal for #VaccinEquity and encouraging those countries with access to vaccine supplies not to forget their less fortunate neighbors. Solidarity!'<sup>4</sup>

But really, 'back to normal' is never the right path, and most emphatically not correct after what we have seen these past sixteen months. Some walls in our cities carry the graffiti: 'Let's not get back to normal because normal was the problem.' There must be no nostalgia for a blithe return to our pre-Covid existence with a sigh of relief that our long Lent is finally over.

In the Vatican's Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, in the section for migrants, refugees and other vulnerable people on the move, the first two steps we always emphasise are to *welcome* those who approach us in their threatened condition and *protect* them from further harm.

The pandemic has extended the need for welcome and protection to many, many more people. Yet so many countries and communities have cut back on welcoming, and they fail to protect many within their resident population as well as those on the move.

For example, the poorest paid workers in suspended sectors of the economy – restaurants, hotels, cruise ships, tourist destinations, entertainment – are suddenly destitute and left to fend for themselves. Those who live in crowded conditions and impoverished areas face elevated vulnerability to Covid-19 infection. We have seen the shocking conditions in many long-term care facilities for the elderly and witnessed the high numbers of deaths there. Migrant workers have faced restrictions that make it impossible to reach their place of employment, and then unable to return home due to lack of money or closed borders.

Moreover, displacement within nations and across borders has not been suspended by the pandemic. 'Sadly, among those who are forced to leave their homeland for various reasons, there are always dozens of children and young people alone, without their family and exposed to many dangers.' The Holy Father pleads: 'Let us ensure that these fragile and defenseless creatures do not lack proper care and preferential humanitarian channels.'<sup>5</sup>

Another global threat not suspended by the pandemic is climate change. The onset of Covid-19 was sudden and specific; climate change is a long-term affair that began its modern course with the industrial revolution. Despite the differences, they combine in their ethical, social, economic, political and global relevance. They affect everyone on earth, and above all the life of the poorest and most fragile. The response must not be rejection, but welcome; it must not be neglect, but protection. These combined crises 'appeal to our responsibility to promote, through collective and joint commitment, a culture of care, which places human dignity and the common good at the centre.'<sup>6</sup>

Is this hoping for too much? Can humanity in 2021 confess its own sins and amend the destructive behaviours on which the pandemic shone its un pitying light? Do we have what Catholics call a 'firm purpose of amendment'? When Pope Francis dedicates a chapter of *Fratelli tutti* to 'A better kind of politics', do we think this is remotely possible? Yes, we know whom we are supposed to show *solidarity with*, but we're confused about whom we are supposed to have *confidence in*.

Yet there are signs of hope. The Migrants and Refugees Section has learned of many initiatives, many acts of exceptional compassion to alleviate the plight of people in great need during the pandemic.

The spirit of the Good Samaritan, whose story is central to the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, is alive in many places. Veritable sanctuaries and schools of solidarity have sprung up, both in person and online: 'In the midst of crises, a *solidarity* guided by *faith* enables us to translate the love of God in our globalized culture ... by interweaving communities and sustaining processes of growth that are truly human and solid.'<sup>7</sup> And so our hope, though battered during the pandemic, is not lost; its vaccination is the good news of the resurrection which restores and transforms: '*it is always possible to begin anew*, because there is always a new life that God can awaken in us in spite of all our failures.'<sup>8</sup>

Even the disciples cowered in fear behind closed doors after the crucifixion. They thought that nothing good could ever happen again. And to a certain degree, we could say that they were being 'rational' or 'sensible' or 'logical'. But the logic of God is that nothing is impossible with his help. Thus, we look to the power of the resurrection to help strengthen our resolve and deepen our hope.

Easter teaches us to renew our faith in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth, whom we can confidently implore: 'Send forth your spirit and they shall be created, and you shall renew the face of the earth' (Psalm 104:30). Think of the enormous Easter joy of so believing as to ignite an effective conversion which could decelerate, arrest and eventually reverse the climate crisis. The enormous Easter joy of a new way of seeing things such that the Covid-19 vaccines are distributed equitably and administered efficiently to give everyone the immunity and security of a real family. The enormous Easter joy of living *Fratelli tutti* and welcoming new members into our communities and parishes, into our schools and economy, into our culture and society.

'The risen Christ is hope for all who continue to suffer from the pandemic,'<sup>9</sup> so that all 'might walk in newness of life' (Romans 6:4). What Easter should bring – should always bring, but should especially bring this year – is a ringing and life-changing boost in faith and hope: 'Do not be afraid!' The Risen Lord is with us.

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

*The original article by Cardinal Czerny was published in Italian by L'Osservatore Romano on 8 April 2021:*

<https://www.osservatoreromano.va/it/news/2021-04/quo-079/una-pasqua-per-rinascere-br-dopo-la-lunga-quaresima-br-della-pan.html>

---

<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, Address at the Angelus (28 March 2021):

[http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2021/documents/papa-francesco\\_angelus\\_20210328.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2021/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20210328.html)

<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, General Audience (26 August 2020):

[https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2020/documents/papa-francesco\\_20200826\\_udienza-generale.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200826_udienza-generale.html)

<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, Easter Message of the Holy Father and Blessing *Urbi et Orbi* (4 April 2021):

<https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2021/04/04/0207/00446.html#ing>

<sup>4</sup> See:

<https://twitter.com/DrTedros/status/1378727568770236417?s=20>

<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis, Address at the Angelus (7 February 2021):

[https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2021/documents/papa-francesco\\_angelus\\_20210207.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2021/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20210207.html)

---

<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis, Video message for the High Level Virtual Climate Ambition Summit 2020:

[http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/message/s/pont-messages/2020/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201212\\_videomessaggio-climate-ambition-summit.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/message/s/pont-messages/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20201212_videomessaggio-climate-ambition-summit.html)

<sup>7</sup> Pope Francis, General Audience (2 September 2020):

[https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2020/documents/papa-francesco\\_20200902\\_udienza-generale.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200902_udienza-generale.html)

<sup>8</sup> Pope Francis, Homily at the Easter Vigil, St Peter's Basilica (3 April 2021):

[https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2021/documents/papa-francesco\\_20210403\\_omelia-vegliapasquale.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2021/documents/papa-francesco_20210403_omelia-vegliapasquale.html)

<sup>9</sup> Pope Francis, Easter Message of the Holy Father and Blessing *Urbi et Orbi* (4 April 2021).