

A pandemic which “unmasks” us

Our personal lives and our community lives have been turned upside down by the dreadful situation of the pandemic and the lockdown which has since ensued. We have also been stripped of our ideal ‘me’, our community ‘me’ and perhaps more deeply our religious ‘me’. The pandemic has exposed as never before the interdependence which binds us to every human being on the planet.

Temporality

This pandemic has been raging for several weeks and it has swept aside our agendas like a tsunami: no more appointments, no more planning. Meetings – most of which were planned and prepared a long time ago - have been cancelled one after the other. It is as if we are being held hostage by a timeless bubble suspended in a present that is repeating itself endlessly, always the same thing, day after day. Our relationship with time is changing and stretches out... Blessed are we because we eat and pray at a set time. These schedules keep us structured and we reap the benefits of having a healthy routine. Comforting rituals that give a rhythm to our days!

We were so used to juggling time and making it submit to our calendars, missions and activities. But now the horse has reared. Our race horse has turned into a stubborn mule that won't move. We are at a standstill. "Be still, and know that I am God!" (Ps 46: 10.) What might God be saying to us during this unprecedented time when we are forced to stand still? Learning to decelerate and slow down can be brutal and we may also suffer from withdrawal symptoms when we stop all the many activities and occupations that fill our days. "Stop!"- and that's an order! ...Are we able to respond with wisdom, docility and humility?

Destiny

We no longer have an individual destiny with this coronavirus. Our destiny has become a collective one. If I decide to go out and meet other people, I am not risking contamination solely for myself, but I risk contaminating all those I come into contact with, particularly my community. That means that my personal decision (to go out, to help someone, to go shopping...) affects more than myself because I can be a healthy carrier of the virus without even knowing it. Perhaps this is one of the first times in our lives when our personal decisions affect the people we live with in such a significant way. More than ever, my personal decision will have repercussions on my community, especially on those who are older or more vulnerable. If I decide to visit a person who is lonely and isolated, or to go to the cemetery for a funeral, all of my community are affected by the possible consequences of my actions. Each daily micro decision (like washing my hands with soap, or choosing not to), has major consequences. I could contaminate someone I pass in the street and send that person into intensive care or, if I prevent that from happening, that person remains healthy. We live in an extremely individualistic society, where we justify any decision we make, even if it is weird or eccentric, with 'It's my choice!' But now we need to take the Butterfly Effect seriously. Every time a butterfly flaps its wings, there are repercussions on the other side of the planet. In the same way, every single one of our small decisions (to respect the lock down, to wear a mask) has short-term consequences for the destiny of our brothers and sisters. We no longer have an individual destiny separate from our contemporaries; we are now caught up in the huge collective destiny of all of humanity.

Heroism

This pandemic calls into question our collective image of Christian heroism. Deep in our collective unconscious we admire actions such as kissing a leper, caring for those afflicted by the plague: we admire the Christian who risks his life or even gives his life to help others. Alongside these commendable examples, there are also all the priests and religious who have given everything, even their lives, in the fight against dictatorships or terrorism. Not being married or having children meant they could speak out and take action without fear of reprisals for their families. Does our religious commitment not allow us to make the same radical choices for the good of the other? Have we not become religious precisely for this current time, to be able now to give our lives to save others? The answer is far from simple.

What exactly is the difference between epidemics of the past and the one we are experiencing now? Scientific knowledge. Scientific knowledge which shows us how microbes are transmitted (by contaminated hands), which insists on the utmost importance of good hygiene. Undoubtedly, the hero of past centuries did not understand what a disease agent was. He was not aware that he could be carrier of a contagious disease. In fact, he accepted willingly that he too could fall victim to it. But there is no place for such ignorance today. Even a primary school pupil knows that he can transmit the disease by contact without having any symptoms himself. The other main difference relates to the high technology of the treatments at stake. When the missionary chose to care for the lepers, he had oral treatments or bandages at his disposal. From time to time, though he was not in much of a hurry to use it, he had recourse to surgery.

Now, each new case might prove too much for the skills of the health worker, and the patient may end up in the intensive care unit. This new illness is capable of overloading the emergency services, and blocking the intensive care units which do not have enough staff or equipment to cope. In days gone by, the patient who had the plague could be helped by the limited knowledge and infinite compassion of a holy religious. Today each patient who is seriously infected by COVID 19 has the right to the best cutting-edge treatments available but the treatment is in short supply because there are too many cases. So, we need to try to limit the number of cases. What was a heroic gesture in times gone by could become a real health disaster in today's society.

Yes, even Christian heroism has changed. You can no longer work as a free-lancer, or behave like a maverick, or a rebel in the name of a Christian ideal which belongs to another age. Today we are human links in an immense chain of solidarity made up of religious, atheists, believers and agnostics, and I can only act by respecting the noble efforts of all the other participants in this great health-care chain, no matter what each one believes. We are experiencing our interdependence on a global scale, in a way hitherto unheard of.

When 'not doing something' becomes a moral act

We are so used to discerning the right commitments to take on, the right thing to do. Well, now the moral act asked of us is to do nothing. We need to stay at home, have the least amount of physical contact possible and not expose ourselves to the virus. These are the recommendations which run contrary to the moral values we are used to.

Now it is completely moral not to go to mass, not to welcome the priest who would like to celebrate mass in our house. That is ethical because it takes into account the interdependency which links us to those close to us as well as to those who are far. Today we stay at home- in lockdown. That is the most moral choice that there is.

The right place

Maybe our conscience is troubling us? Am I in the right place? Should I not be with my brother or another member of my family who is ill? Should I not join such and such a community who needs me more? Would I not be more useful elsewhere? These questions can torment us and rob us of our sleep. They are real worries. However certain criteria can help us regain our peace. When lockdown is an order, the right place for me is to remain where I was when the lockdown was announced. Obeying strict health measures is the first step on the ladder of obedience to God. My proper place is where I put the least number of people in danger. Staying at home and avoiding all unnecessary contact is the right thing to do. We can avail of many other ways of communicating with our friends and families-email, text messages, skype calls etc...

Tutorism

This strange word refers to the doctrine that, in cases of moral doubt, it is best to follow the safer and the most rigorous course or the one in agreement with the law. That should guide our behaviour today. These decisions that are taken can never be too strict. We hear certain voices among us saying 'These measures are exaggerated' 'Fear makes them act like that' Today informed prudence and wisdom must dictate what are the most stringent and exacting measures to be taken. We need to submit to them willingly, with real self-control. We need to say yes to the most demanding restrictions for the good of everybody.

A confined space

The epidemic affects not only our relationship with time but equally our relationship with space. The lockdown keeps us in a confined space and is like magnifying mirror giving us a much closer view of our interpersonal relationships. Keeping healthy community relationships can become even more difficult. Different personality traits may become more exacerbated in this lockdown. We need to learn to put up with one another and support one another. We need to put up with those little mannerisms that can annoy us and we need to support each other – like supporting a sports team. This temporary living 'behind closed doors' can be a very ingenious way of helping us to evaluate our way of living community.

Obedience

To a certain extent, this pandemic reveals our relationship to our vow of obedience. Are we feeling rebellious or do we constantly criticise? Or are we able to be flexible when faced with these health recommendations? Does our religious vow of obedience not start by being a good citizen, playing our part when the rules are there for the good of the greatest number? Of course, there are situations when civil disobedience is the best choice. But when there is a health war, this civil disobedience does not hold sway. On the contrary, it puts many of our fellow citizens in danger. The recommendations of lockdown, of avoiding all unnecessary contact make us ask ourselves 'Just how docile and humble am I?' (Humility is part of our charism). Do I have the humility to recognise that scientists know better than I what is the right thing to do in this planetary crisis? Let's look at our charism of humility in a fresh way, from the angle of docility of spirit, when faced with measures which can hurt my own will or my pride. The vow of obedience is the fundamental recognition of our interdependence. Here is a world event where we are confronted with interdependence. What will be our reaction as a citizen, a Christian, a religious and a Sister of the Sacred Heart of Jesus?

An experience of being stripped

The pandemic forces us to wear masks. Paradoxically, it *unmasks* what we are really like. That can be a painful experience. 'I did not think I was so anxious', 'I thought I had more courage'- these are some of the reflexions that can rise up inside of us and undermine our ideal 'me' Let's admit it. It's more exciting to be heroic in the face of difficult challenges than in front of simple actions. Naaman, the soldier, already had that experience. He was annoyed because he was only asked to bathe in the river to be cured. He was ready to make much bigger sacrifices. (2 Kings 5) "If the prophet had asked you to do something much more difficult, wouldn't you have done it? How much more then when he says to you 'Go and bathe in the river and you will be cleansed'."(2 Kings 5:13)

We are asked to stay at home, to remain in lockdown, not to go close to others. In that way we are playing our part in the fight against this virus and we will save lives. It's simple... So why get annoyed?

All the countries where we are present have closed their borders. The recommendations for lockdown vary from one place to another. But the spread of the virus is the same everywhere. Let's take advantage of the internationality of our congregation. Let's learn from each other. Some countries are in the thick of it- others are only at the beginning. Let's all be extremely prudent and vigilant. Real wisdom is to know one's limits. We must not act inconsiderately. We forgot that we were vulnerable. This pandemic reminds us of it in a very brutal way. Let's learn humility.

Sr. Anne Chapell, Paris 30 March 2020

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Anne Chapell', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.