



MISSION PEACE & JUSTICE

MPJ Monthly Newsletter "Hope in Action"

Volume 2, Issue 7

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By: Dr. Victoria Brennan

Staying Apart to Draw Closer Together

Presided over by: Pope Francis
"Urbi et Orbi" Blessing
Sagrato of
St Peter's Basilica
Friday, 27 March 2020



Dear SJS Community,

Thank you for the great support you offered to the OASIS Program led by the Catholic Charities Santa Barbara Region through our MPJ Lenten Collection



Catholic Charities
of Los Angeles, Inc.

Santa Barbara Region

last Friday. **We collected \$1408,02.** Know, that your donations are crucial to support the independent living of the low-income seniors from across the Ventura County. This help is very much needed right

now, when they are the most vulnerable in facing the worldwide pandemic crisis.

Due to the rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus (and associated with it disease), and to protect members of our SJS family, the MPJ Talent Show (originally scheduled for May 2) has been postponed. Since our MPJ Team has already collected gifts for the Annual Auction, please, be advised that all the collected items will be passed to the new MPJ Team for the Annual Auction in the academic year 2020/2021.

Likewise, no Silent Auction will take place this semester, as many of our Community members are not returning to the Seminary after Easter. At this

point, our team is not accepting more items. If you have donated an item and wish to have it back, please, contact Jeffrey Roxas directly.

On behalf of the entire MPJ Team, I would like to ensure you all of our prayers for the SJS Family, as well as for all those affected by the pandemic.

I encourage you to read a thought-provoking and heartfelt reflection "Staying Apart to Draw Closer Together" by Doctor Victoria Brennan, the Director of Edward L. & Carrie E. Doheny Libraries.



Kamil Ziolkowski

STAYING APART TO DRAW CLOSER TOGETHER

By Dr. Victoria Brennan



I find myself thinking in antinomies¹ in recent days and here I would like to share with you a few of these antinomic thoughts – unpolished and loosely ordered, much like I experience them in my own reflections. Some of you may have similar thoughts, while others may see things from a very different – even opposite – perspective. And here, too, the antinomic tradition proves valuable. For in the end we are called, especially now, to harmonize all our fragmentary perspectives into one polyphonic prayer of support for each other and for our world in this difficult time.

Knowing and Unknowning. As I write this, it has only been a week since we have collectively undertaken a program "social distancing," each of us retreating to our own "ortus conclusus". It's been a stressful week, full of changes and challenges, seemingly trivial practical questions and questioning it all. We have been overwhelmed by a flood of information, from major announcements of national and statewide protocols to emails from nearly every business we were ever in contact with notifying us, for example, of the closure of a dentist office and the hand-washing policy of the smallest book vendor on the East Coast. And yet, despite all the information, we face an overwhelming flood



of unknowns and uncertainty (there is no way to know where all this will end up). We continue to search and vigilantly monitor the landscape for the best information to guide us in our response; we realize how important it is to stay informed about a situation that changes daily – even, hourly.

God's unfailing mercy while preparing ourselves to confront and respond to any number of possible outcomes.

Proximity and Distance. The pandemic has separated us from each other, taken us out of our daily routine and our "comfort zone". It has taken over so much of our attention and energy in these recent days. And yet, for many of us, and for me personally, it presents a unique opportunity to slow down and look within ourselves. The whirlpool of our "normal" daily routine does not always grant us this possibility.

In this new light we see more clearly the treasure of human life as well as its incredible fragility. We experience a truth we always knew but for the most part enjoyed the luxury of ignoring: how subtle, how delicate are the borders between health and illness, wellbeing/ flourishing and travail, life and death.

In a new light we also look at those around us: our family members and friends, realizing anew how dear and important they are to us; we look at our neighbours and those who are most vulnerable and realize how much we want to protect them. It is only in these past days that I made the time to call my dear older Jesuit professor with whom I haven't spoken since visiting him last summer, paying a virtual visit to him in his own "ortus conclusus" in Rome. We all have similar small anecdotes we could tell. What is easy to miss is the collective impact of the renewed contact and deepened connections we are all making during this period of "distancing". It is comforting to realize that our love for our neighbor is stronger than the fear and shock of suddenly finding ourselves enclosed with each other and – even more challenging – with ourselves without our usual interruptions and distractions.

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And in the midst of this deluge of information and uncertainty, we are called to remain calm, placing our hope and trust in

¹ I use the term Antinomy here not in its well known philosophical meaning, but as it is used in the Byzantine theological tradition: a formulation, marked by a strong tension, where its opposite poles are equally important, meaningful, and yet resist any attempts at resolution. One of the best examples of antinomy is union without confusion – the Christian dogma of the Holy Trinity in all of its various formulations, such as "God is Three in One and One in Three", "One in nature and Three in person" etc. There are also many biblical examples, such as Mark 8:35: «whoever will save his life shall lose it; but whoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it».



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Love of our neighbour now takes on a very different aspect. We normally think of love in terms of closeness, of proximity (here the Ukrainian term for "neighbour" - ближній, as in most Romance languages, is especially meaningful, since it literally means "the one who is near or close"; in Spanish, for example, el prójimo, el vecino).

At the moment, however, it is distance that becomes the visual symbol of authentic love and social responsibility. The touch, a simple and yet powerful sign of our life and love, is diligently avoided, since in it might lay the price of someone's life. To follow the path of love we have to take seriously all the precautions advised by health authorities and exercise a strict self-discipline that will allow to go through this difficult time more quickly and, hopefully, with fewer losses.

Then again, our goal is not only to get through it all somehow, but to make our way through this and to come out stronger and better people: to let these new challenges and experiences make our love of neighbor grow. While we must go without physical touch for now, we can learn to value the many other tools still available to us – virtual communication, smiles, words of encouragement, attentiveness to small details, respect, and above all, prayer!

From Distance to Unity. While we observe physical distance, we have a unique opportunity to open our hearts even wider: to God, since in moments like this we are left with little doubt that everything is in the hands of God; and to our neighbour, both the nearest and the farthest, who may need our prayers and assistance. We are presented with a unique chance to make more room for God in our life, in our thoughts, and in our emotions. Among the many difficulties we are facing, we are free to take up the unique challenge of transforming this time of physical distance (distance, not isolation!) into a deeper, more intimate, and more authentic unity with God and with each other. This unity will make us better and stronger, and we can dare to hope that our world will never be the same again.

May God help us to make our way through these complex and challenging times and to open our hearts to those who need our help!

I would like to conclude with these words, attributed to Pope Francis, that deeply resonated with my thoughts:



*"Tonight before falling asleep, think about when we will return to the street.
When we hug again, when all the shopping together will seem like a party.
Let's think about when the coffees will return to the bar, the small talk, the photos close to each other.
We think about when it will be all a memory, but normalcy will seem an unexpected and beautiful gift.
We will love everything that has so far seemed futile to us.
Every second will be precious.
Swims at the sea, the sun until late, sunsets, toasts, laughter.
We will go back to laughing together.
Strength and courage."*

"URBI ET ORBI" BLESSING Presided over By: Pope Francis



"When evening had come" (Mk 4:35). The Gospel passage we have just heard begins like this. For weeks now it has been evening. Thick darkness has gathered over our squares, our streets and our cities; it has taken over our lives, filling everything with a deafening silence and a distressing void, that stops everything as it passes by; we feel it in the air, we notice in people's gestures, their glances give them away. We find ourselves afraid and lost. Like the disciples in the Gospel we were caught off guard by an unexpected, turbulent storm. We have realized that we are on the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented, but at the same time important and needed, all of us called to row together, each of us in need of comforting the other. On this boat... are all of us. Just like those disciples, who spoke anxiously with one voice, saying "We are perishing?" (v. 38), so we too have realized that we cannot go on thinking of ourselves, but only together can we do this.

It is easy to recognize ourselves in this story. What is harder to understand is Jesus' attitude. While his disciples are quite naturally alarmed and desperate, he stands in the stern, in the part of the boat that sinks first. And what does he do? In spite of the tempest, he sleeps on soundly, trusting in the Father; this is the only time in the Gospels we see Jesus sleeping. When he wakes up, after calming the wind and the waters, he turns to the disciples in a reproaching voice: "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" (v. 40).

Let us try to understand. In what does the lack of the disciples' faith consist, as contrasted with Jesus' trust? They had not stopped believing in him; in fact, they called on him. But we see how they call on him: "Teacher, do you not care if we perish?" (v. 38). Do you not care: they think that Jesus is not interested in them, does not care about them. One of the things that hurts us and our families most when we hear it said is: "Do you not care about me?" It is a phrase that wounds and unleashes storms in our hearts. It would have shaken Jesus too. Because he, more than anyone, cares about us. Indeed, once they have called on him, he saves his disciples from their discouragement.

The storm exposes our vulnerability and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities. It shows us how we have allowed to become dull and feeble the very things that nourish, sustain and strengthen our lives and our communities. The tempest lays bare all our prepackaged ideas and forgetfulness of what nourishes our people's souls; all those attempts that anesthetize us with ways of thinking and acting that supposedly "save" us, but instead prove incapable of putting us in touch with our roots and keeping alive the memory of those who have gone before us. We deprive ourselves of the antibodies we need to confront adversity.

In this storm, the façade of those stereotypes with which we camouflaged our egos, always worrying about our image, has fallen away, uncovering once more that (blessed) common belonging, of which we cannot be deprived: our belonging as brothers and sisters. "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" Lord, your word this evening strikes us and regards us, all of us. In this world, that you love more than we do, we have gone ahead at breakneck speed, feeling powerful and able to do anything. Greedy for profit, we let ourselves get caught up in things, and lured away by haste. We did not stop at your reproach to us, we were not shaken awake by wars or injustice across the world, nor did we listen to the cry of the poor or of our ailing planet. We carried on regardless, thinking we would stay healthy in a world that was sick. Now that we are in a stormy sea, we implore you: "Wake up, Lord!"

"Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" Lord, you are calling to us, calling us to faith. Which is not so much believing that you exist, but coming to you and trusting in you. This Lent your call reverberates urgently: "Be converted!", "Return to me with all your heart" (Joel 2:12). You are calling on us to seize this time of trial as a time of choosing. It is not the time of your judgement, but of our judgement: a time to choose what matters and what passes away, a time to separate what is necessary from what is not. It is a time to get our lives back on track with regard to you, Lord, and to others. We can look to so many exemplary companions for the journey, who, even though fearful, have reacted by giving their lives. This is the force of the Spirit poured out and fashioned in courageous and generous self-denial. It is the life in the Spirit that can redeem, value and demonstrate how our lives are woven together and sustained by ordinary people – often forgotten people – who do not appear in newspaper and magazine headlines nor on the grand catwalks of the latest show, but who without any doubt are in these very days writing the decisive events of our time: doctors, nurses, supermarket employees, cleaners, caregivers, providers of transport, law and order forces, volunteers, priests, religious men and women and so very many others who have understood that no one reaches salvation by themselves. In the face of so much suffering, where the authentic development of our peoples is assessed, we experience the priestly prayer of Jesus: "That they may all be one" (Jn 17:21). How many people every day are exercising patience and offering hope, taking care to sow not panic but a shared responsibility. How many fathers, mothers, grandparents and teachers are showing our children, in small everyday gestures, how to face up to and navigate a crisis by adjusting their routines, lifting their gaze and fostering prayer. How many are praying, offering and interceding for the good of all. Prayer and quiet service: these are our victorious weapons.

"Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" Faith begins when we realise we are in need of salvation. We are not self-sufficient; by ourselves we flounder: we need the Lord, like ancient navigators needed the stars. Let us invite Jesus into the boats of our lives. Let us hand over our fears to him so that he can conquer them. Like the disciples, we will experience that with him on board there will be no shipwreck. Because this is God's strength: turning to the good everything that happens to us, even the bad things. He brings serenity into our storms, because with God life never dies.

The Lord asks us and, in the midst of our tempest, invites us to awaken and put into practice that solidarity and hope capable of giving strength, support and meaning to these hours when everything seems to be floundering. The Lord awakens us as to awaken and revive our Easter faith. We have an anchor: by his cross we have been saved. We have a rudder: by his cross we have been redeemed. We have a hope: by his cross we have been healed and embraced so that nothing and no one can separate us from his redeeming love. In the midst of isolation when we are suffering from a lack of tenderness and chances to meet up, and we experience the loss of so many things, let us once again listen to the proclamation that saves us: he is risen and is living by our side. The Lord asks us from his cross to rediscover the life that awaits us, to look towards those who look to us, to strengthen, recognize and foster the grace that lives within us. Let us not quench the wavering flame (cf. Is 42:3) that never falters, and let us allow hope to be rekindled.

Embracing his cross means finding the courage to embrace all the hardships of the present time, abandoning for a moment our eagerness for power and possessions in order to make room for the creativity that only the Spirit is capable of inspiring. It means finding the courage to create spaces where everyone can recognize that they are called, and to allow new forms of hospitality, fraternity and solidarity. By his cross we have been saved in order to embrace hope and let it strengthen and sustain all measures and all possible avenues for helping us protect ourselves and others. Embracing the Lord in order to embrace hope: that is the strength of faith, which frees us from fear and gives us hope.

"Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" Dear brothers and sisters, from this place that tells of Peter's rock-solid faith, I would like this evening to entrust all of you to the Lord, through the intercession of Mary, Health of the People and Star of the stormy Sea. From this colonnade that embraces Rome and the whole world, may God's blessing come down upon you as a consoling embrace. Lord, may you bless the world, give health to our bodies and comfort our hearts. You ask us not to be afraid. Yet our faith is weak and we are fearful. But you, Lord, will not leave us at the mercy of the storm. Tell us again: "Do not be afraid" (Mt 28:5). And we, together with Peter, "cast all our anxieties onto you, for you care about us" (cf. 1 Pet 5:7).