

FACING THE PANDEMIC: A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

Even today, during these months of Covid-19, people are turning to religion and getting in touch with their spiritual side. At times through the trauma of tragedy, there's a rediscovery of human fragility, both one's own and that of others, leading to a search for consolation and meaning, for life and for death.

The question for today is how the sacred might provide help and comfort, when it is already beginning to look and feel so different. Oftentimes in similar situations in the past, with religion having such a central role in the social sphere, its rites and propitious processions would have been at the heart of the public reaction against the contagion of plagues. So where is God today? Has He been stripped of His citizenship, sent into exile by secularisation?

It would have been unthinkable in bygone eras to have the kind of social distancing, especially as regards public religious practice, that we have now. Yet, in the absence of an effective vaccine and based on what we have learned so far about the virus, this is what a scientific-healthcare approach to the pandemic ineluctably demands. One cannot but be amazed at the sight of world-famous religious sites, of all faith traditions, closed today, denuded of their faithful and their ceremonies.

Like everyone else caught largely unawares by the novelty of the situation, these same religious bodies are rapidly expanding their use of different media platforms to proclaim their message. As a result, the socialising effect of worship, religious education and charitable works, which had perhaps been overlooked prior to the coronavirus, is now coming once again to the fore. We see no shortage of faith leaders and religious figures, fighting on the front line in hospitals or treatment centres, ministering at the bedsides of those afflicted by the virus.

Paradoxically, though, for those who truly desire it, being forced to isolate within the privacy of one's own home can lead to an even more personal, and perhaps more authentic, encounter with the divine.

It is precisely this deep moral reflection on one's uniqueness as a human person, on one's dignity, on one's always being an end rather than a means, which opens up the heart to hope. This becomes a silent prayer, first and foremost within oneself, welcoming the invitation to believe that, with physical death, the mystery which is every woman and man does not cease to be.

Faith is, in fact, an immense gift given to "earthenware vessels", which provides structure to the person. It can only be asked for, without ever allowing oneself to make judgements about the people who have not yet received it.

The religious person seeks to make contact with the One who has compassion for humanity and all His creatures; something that is manifest within all monotheistic Faiths, but not exclusive to them. And this goes beyond ethical respect, because it involves love and total devotion. The various Revelations all tell us that this is something that lies at the heart of the divine Being, and consequently, forms part of the spiritual-religious make-up of the human being.

Compassion, then, on which hope draws, is the thing that, even today continues to prick consciences, leading from the private individual to the public, social sphere.

If at the centre of religious hope there is the notion of gratuity - mercy towards the fragile, the weak, those who have been "cast off" – gratuity likewise deserves a place right at the heart of society. In

this way, starting from gratuity, the organisational models for how we live - political, economic-financial, and social in the most global sense - might be seen in a new light.

Every true spiritual experience always has ethical and social implications, which are catalysed by hope.

Rediscovering this today, from the privacy of our own homes, is an invitation to us to “make a fresh start”, so that we no longer abandon the weak (the elderly, the needy, the sick, the imprisoned, etc.) to the margins of our “associated lives”, but put their care and safekeeping at the heart of a genuine society. This begins with the Home of all of us, the Earth, an object more of plunder than of protection over the last few decades.

“Be on your guard against hypocrisy!” the most ancient echoes of the supernatural warn, because it is the unequivocal sign of the presence of evil.

Ought we not, then, to review fundamentally so many things regarding our way of life and of living? Or is it enough to make one or two superficial “adjustments” to the criteria we use to allocate resources and simply start the rat race again as soon as possible from its bogus foundation that has caused/allowed so much grief? Does compassion not cry out for a complete rethink of our responsibilities?

In trying to find answers to such big questions, the paths of hope that religion has traced out for us is also a challenge for us to tune in, first of all, to our own conscience and its verdicts; to thus provide public platforms for discussion, even if these may occasionally prove acrimonious and complicated; the important thing is that they are never deceitful. They are routes by which the person of faith must anchor him/herself in alliances with all people of equal “good will”.

The believer experiences this aspect of developing responsibility in dialogue with God too, remembering what Augustine of Hippo suggested: “Do not allow yourselves to be distracted by what is merely an empty appearance. Where there is sincere, humble and patient listening, you will find within you the Light and strength to journey courageously along the paths of Truth”.

Samuele Sangalli