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REFLECTIONS ON COVID-19 FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE OF JUSTICE AND PEACE

ABSTRACT

The COVID 19 pandemic has provoked many reflections. Here we present some of them formulated from a Christian perspective of justice and peace, that is, from the point of view of a Christian committed to building a world of justice and peace following the Social Teaching of the Church. The first group of reflections has to do with being a Christian *per se*, and therefore the virtues that used to be neglected and those that are currently exercised in the time of pandemic are taken into consideration: hope, humility, prudence, fortitude. The second group of reflections deals directly with the issues of justice and peace. During the pandemic, these issues manifested as closely related: “everything is related, everything is connected.” After a consideration of an existential nature on justice, follow others: on the principles of solidarity, subsidiarity, health as a global public good and on the crucial issues of work and respect for creation. Finally, the Christian proposal is indicated, which is that of the “culture of care” proposed in terms of integral ecology.

Keywords: COVID-19, pandemic, hope, humility, prudence, fortitude, relationship, justice, mercy, social justice, poverty, solidarity, subsidiarity, health, common good, creation, culture of care

It is not an exaggeration to call the COVID-19 pandemic a 'historical' event because it has affected and continues to affect the lives of everyone, healthy and sick, on the whole planet in the same period. This event deserves reflections and evaluations that will surely be arising over time.

REFLECTIONS FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

The Christian perspective of Justice and Peace takes into account first of all the fact of belonging to a Christian Church, to the Catholic Church and to local Churches. Believing or not believing in eternal life makes a fundamental difference in the existence of every human being, a difference that becomes even more tangible in the times of COVID. Living in **hope**, that is, in the confident expectation of the Resurrection indicated to us by Jesus Christ,¹ puts Christians in a unique position, a paradoxical position, which is admirably described in the *Epistle to Diognetus*. The author of this very ancient Christian text states that *Christians, neither by region, nor by voice, nor by customs, are to be distinguished from other men however they live in their homeland but as strangers; they participate in everything like citizens and are detached from everything like foreigners. Every foreign homeland is their homeland, and every homeland is foreign (...) they live on earth, but they have their citizenship in heaven, they obey the established laws, and with their lives they go beyond the laws.*

There is no text more appropriate than this to describe the young **Carlo Acutis**, recently proclaimed blessed in the city of Assisi. This young man, who died in 2006 at the age of fifteen, lived his short life totally immersed in our time and simultaneously a citizen of heaven. A kind of computer genius, he was also very kind towards people around him; he went to Mass and recited the rosary every day. In his short life, he managed to conceptualize and carry out an exhibition on Eucharistic miracles, which can be accessed virtually in addition to its being hosted in parishes and shrines all over the world.

But there is more that this pandemic teaches us, Christians, lovers of the virtues, more sensitive to various meanings of this time. We have become aware, in fact, that some of these virtues are neglected in today's world, and we have had the opportunity to exercise, perhaps unwittingly, others. To begin with, we have neglected the virtue of **humility**. Scientific progress, undoubtedly impressive also in the field of medicine (in the last hundred years, global life expectancy has doubled), initially made us wrongly believe that we could quickly tame the little virus, however we soon realized that it was not easy to do so. As Pope Francis says in his latest encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* (*All Brothers*), the virus has highlighted our false certainties² and although it cannot be said that

¹ See Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, no. 1, at <https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/it/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi.html>, 23 January 2021.

² Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 7, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html>, 23 January 2021.

the pandemic is a divine punishment, *it is hard to imagine that this global disaster is unrelated to our way of approaching reality, our claim to be absolute masters of our own lives and of all that exists.*³

We have also neglected the virtue of **prudence**, understood in the true sense of the word. In fact, *prudence is not to be confused with timidity or fear (...) it is prudence that immediately guides the judgment of conscience. The prudent man determines and directs his conduct in accordance with this judgment.*⁴ We were unprepared, our public health care systems in many countries had been directed towards “market” needs and were unable to respond adequately to the pandemic.

But there is also a virtue that we have all practiced a little bit, some more than others, especially during the first months, and which has allowed many to perform, in a certain sense, ‘heroic acts’: the virtue of **fortitude**. This cardinal virtue, which could be identified as ‘resilience’ today, *ensures firmness in difficulties and constancy in the pursuit of the good and (...) enables one to conquer fear, even fear of death.*⁵ We have seen, in fact, many doctors, nurses, paramedics and hospital personnel, priests and religious persons assisting the sick and dying at the risk of their own lives. And, sadly, we have also seen them become victims of COVID-19 themselves! We have also witnessed many people in the essential sectors continue to work at a faster pace, despite encountering numerous difficulties, as teachers and professors, schoolchildren, students and their parents who have strived to give and receive distance education. Finally, we have seen lots of videos on the social media, shot to capture humorously the hardest aspects of what we were experiencing and to cheer up each other, sometimes in so imaginative ways as to be shown as an example by the President of the European Commission... A striking illustration, in fact, is that of the young girls from Finale Ligure in Italy – the European country, which was hit by the virus as the first one and belonged to those hardest hit – who, undaunted, played tennis throwing the ball from one terrace to another in their apartment buildings. In doing so, they displayed the will and ability not to give in to adverse circumstances. It can be said that this attitude, this ability to exercise the virtue of fortitude was almost a pleasant surprise we paradoxically owe to the coronavirus. This is true especially for European and Western societies that are often described as spoiled by their well-being.

Interpersonal relationships are vital for all human beings, but for Christians they are, so to speak, constitutive, and not only for the Christian vision of the human person as being in relationship with God, with himself, with others and with nature. In fact, in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* we read: *Being a person in the image and likeness of God (...) involves existing in a relationship, in relation to the other ‘I’ because God himself, one and triune, is the communion of the Father, of the Son and of the*

³ Ibid., no. 34.

⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1806, at <https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P65.HTM>, 27 January 2021.

⁵ Ibid., no. 1808.

Holy Spirit.⁶ Well, it is well known how much social distancing costs us! We know the suffering and the consequences of the difficulty of daily living caused by the obligation to stay at home for grandparents who have not had the joy of embracing and caring for their grandchildren for so long; for sons and daughters who have not been able to visit their parents, especially if they are ill; and also for children who have not been able to play with their peers and for teenagers who, even though they are virtually connected all day long through their smartphones, computers and social networks, have discovered the discomfort of not being able to attend 'live' classes, not being able to meet friends, not being able to play team sports...

Trying to go beyond sheer facts and attempting to find their meaning, one can add that this impossibility to relate physically to the weakest, to the elderly, has forced people, especially us Westerners and Europeans, to an examination of conscience. We may have misunderstood the fourth commandment, **honor thy father and mother**, assuming that technically adequate facilities and skilled professionals are sufficient for a happy old age. Pope Francis' warning is severe in this regard: *We fail to realize that, by isolating the elderly and leaving them in the care of others without the closeness and concern of family members, we disfigure and impoverish the family itself. We also end up depriving young people of a necessary connection to their roots and a wisdom that the young cannot achieve on their own.*⁷ The experience of COVID will probably lead us to rethink the way we maintain ties between generations. Too much suffering has been borne by our elderly who died alone, and by their children and families deprived of the opportunity to thank them for the gift of life, to say farewell, and to celebrate their funerals. The idea of death, which our society has tried to push aside, as evident, among others, in hasty practices related to everything about it, has reappeared overwhelmingly. This is a good thing.

REFLECTIONS AS CHRISTIANS COMMITTED TO BUILDING JUSTICE AND PEACE

The first consideration that the current situation suggests to me is that it reflects an **inseparable link between justice and peace**. As St. Paul VI said, *the invitation to celebrate Peace resounds as an invitation to practice justice*⁸ especially nowadays when *the awareness of Justice is increasing and characterizes the modern world*.⁹ And today practic-

⁶ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church to His Holiness Pope John Paul II Master of Social Doctrine and Evangelical Witness to Justice and Peace*, no. 34, at <https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html#Trinitarian%20love,%20the%20origin%20and%20goal%20of%20the%20human%20person>, 23 January 2021.

⁷ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 19.

⁸ Paul VI, *If You Want Peace, Work for Justice*, in idem, *Message for the Celebration of the Day of Peace*, 1 January 1972, at <https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_p-vi_mes_19711208_v-world-day-for-peace.html>, 23 January 2021.

⁹ Ibid.

ing justice in the field of health, that is, ensuring the right to health for all citizens, is, for those in power, an unavoidable condition of ensuring not only social peace but also peace among nations. One cannot overlook the dangerous nature of mutual accusations between great powers about the virus...

Another consideration comes to mind: never before has the observation Pope Francis repeated several times in his encyclical *Laudato Si'* been more accurate than in the present circumstances, *everything is related, everything is connected*.¹⁰ In these months, the complexity of our societies has clearly manifested. Suffice it to think of the alternative that governments have had to face: protect the health of fellow citizens and bring down the economy or adopt less strict health measures to try to retain functioning of the economy as much as possible? Not to mention the deeper sources of the viruses and their spread among the world's population. According to many scientists, their origin can be traced back to the mad deforestation of large areas of the planet, the loss of biodiversity, and climate change, phenomena that create a real setback in the environment of natural life of both animal species and human beings.¹¹ And we have also seen the rapid and unstoppable spread of the pandemic due to the frenzy of travel and relocations imposed or encouraged by the globalization: the virus knows no borders. And, again, we have witnessed the link between COVID-19 and the school world, the quality of our children's education, but also the difficulties with the use of technology, as well as a forced and at the same time welcomed acquisition of new skills in this respect. These are but a few quick examples of the 'interconnection' between different areas vital to humans that we have all seen during this experience.

To come more specifically into the issues of justice and peace, I would like to make a couple of remarks on **justice** related to the post-Vatican II Catholic Church. In 1971, the Second Synod of Bishops (an institution created by St. Paul VI at the incentive of Vatican Council II) was held, with justice as one of its two main topics. It was devoted essentially to international justice. In fact, the Bishops wrote: *we have been able to grasp (...) the grave injustices that weave a web of domination, oppression and abuse on this earth of men and women, which suffocate freedom and prevent most of the human race from participating in the building and enjoyment of a more just and more fraternal world*.¹² A few years later, St. John Paul II published his encyclical letter *Dives in Misericordia*, that aroused some perplexity in some of the faithful because of the apparent contradiction between justice and mercy. Referring to this, Cardinal Etchegaray, the then President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and a great personality of the Church, explained this difference in a very effective way. Recalling the meeting between the leper and St. Francis, he said: *The leper had no right to the kiss of St. Francis, but he needed it so much*. This profound consideration can easily be coupled with the behavior of so

¹⁰ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, no. 91, 117, 138, 240 et seq., at <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html>, 23 January 2021.

¹¹ See on this also *ibid.*, no. 195.

¹² *Introduction, in Justice in the World*, World Synod of Catholic Bishops, Vatican 1971, p. 6.

many doctors and nurses in these months who made real acts of mercy in our hospitals by giving sick people not only the medical care to which they were entitled, but also human support, assisting them with video calls to the family, and also giving them spiritual support with many prayers recited together with the dying on their deathbeds.

In this same existential sphere, so to speak, still another observation can be made. When we think about justice and our attitude towards it, first of all it is good to make clear what kind of justice we are referring to: justice as a moral virtue, distributive justice, commutative justice, social justice or international justice... The complexity of the issue is so great that we risk remaining confused or inert. In this case, personal experiences can be helpful. Anyone born in a developed, wealthy country where the rule of law and the pursuit of the common good apply universally and who is engaged in service to the poor cannot help but ask himself: What good have I done to be born in a developed country, in a city offering all services instead of in a slum, to have had a proper education, to have travelled the world, and to have a family around me? Apart from stating the obvious that life is a lottery, these questions cannot but sharpen our sense of justice. These same questions are even more insistent and widespread in the time of pandemic, when inequalities have deepened; think about the children in poorer countries who are forced not to go to school but for whom Wi-Fi is pure fantasy! It goes without saying that a similar situation also concerns many children in developed countries: in the city of Rome in the first phase of the pandemic about 30% of middle schools students were excluded from online education... This is doubtlessly the type of *new poverty* of which Pope Francis speaks in *Fratelli Tutti* (nos. 21 and 121).

Solidarity is a concept very familiar to people who are guided by the social doctrine of the Church and which we have seen concrete expressions of so many times in recent months. In *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, it was described by Saint John Paul II as *the firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all*.¹³ Well, this determination has taken the form of caring: from caring for one's neighbor who needs help to taking care not to infect one's neighbor by putting on a mask... But certainly one of the highest and most symbolic moments in the expression of solidarity was reached by Pope Francis during his solitary prayer on 27 March. Referring to the episode of the apostles, who despite being with Jesus, were surprised and frightened by the storm on the Sea of Tiberias, the Pope said: *One of the things that hurts us and our families most when we hear it said is: 'Do you not care about me?'* It's really true, as Pope Francis says, that we are all there on the pandemic boat and *just like those disciples, who spoke anxiously with one voice, saying 'We are perishing,' so we too have realized that we cannot go on thinking of ourselves, but only together can we do this*.¹⁴ No one reaches salvation by themselves.

¹³ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 38, at <https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html>, 23 January 2021.

¹⁴ Pope Francis, *Extraordinary Moment of Prayer*, at <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200327_omelia-epidemia.html>, 27 March 2020.

Considering the European experience, at least the one of the EU, one can be satisfied by a kind of rediscovered solidarity. Late, perhaps, but still on time, the European Union has rediscovered the path of solidarity: French and Italian patients, for example, have been admitted to German or Austrian hospitals and the plan for the relaunch of the economy approved by the European Council is certainly another expression of this.¹⁵

And in this time of pandemic we have also seen more clearly the counterpart of the solidarity, namely **subsidiarity**. We have clearly seen that everything cannot be decided and monitored by central governments, which also have the task of coordinating actions to combat the disease. We have also seen how essential the initiatives of institutions at the local level, including those of the Third Sector and voluntary associations, have been. We sadly realized that the spread of contagion and especially its rate of mortality was caused by the abandonment of the so-called medicine of the territory, that is, the first level, closer to people and the problem itself.

Moreover, COVID-19 with its impact on the daily lives of the sick and healthy alike has given us further confirmation that **health has become a global common good**. In recent decades, we had moved very quickly from considering the health of an individual as a purely personal matter, or at most a family matter, to the awareness that individual health is actually a social matter. Today the epidemic shows us that health has, in fact, all the characteristics of a common good, indeed, of a global common good. That means that it is not enough to protect the health of citizens within national borders, because the virus knows no such barriers, so either we are all safe or no one is safe.¹⁶ This is but another illustration that the principle of Pope Francis, *no one reaches salvation by themselves*, has not only a moral basis but also a rational foundation that comes from evidence.

It is the awareness that health is a global common good that led the European Commission to join the international initiative COVAX for the development of the vaccine against Coronavirus, a vaccine that is accessible, affordable and safe, available to all, and not only to those who can afford it. *Nationalism on vaccines*, said President von der Leyen, *puts lives at risk. Cooperation saves them*.¹⁷

Pope Francis has also repeatedly spoken of the need to make the vaccine available to all; he did so recently in the Message for the 54th World Day of Peace.¹⁸ As early as August 2020, referring to the preferential option for the poor, the Pope said at the General

¹⁵ See M. Maier, "L'Europe entre danger mortel et nouveau départ", *Choisir: revue culturelle*, no. 697 (2020), pp. 21-24.

¹⁶ V. See Pelligra, "La salute è un bene comune globale", *Il Sole 24 ore*, 19 April 2020, at <<https://www.ilssole24ore.com/art/la-salute-e-bene-comune-globale-ADB2iBL>>, 21 January 2021.

¹⁷ U. von der Leyen, *State of the Union Address*, 16 September 2020, at <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_20_1655>, 21 January 2021.

¹⁸ Pope Francis, , *A Culture of Care as a Path to Peace*, in idem, *Message for the Celebration of the 54th World Day of Peace*, no. 1, at <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20201208_messaggio-54giornatamondiale-pace2021.html>, 23 January 2021.

Audience on August 19 that this option *also encourages us to plan the treatment of viruses by prioritizing those who are most in need. It would be sad if, for the vaccine for Covid-19, priority were to be given to the richest! It would be sad if this vaccine were to become the property of this nation or another, rather than universal and for all.*¹⁹

Another fundamental theme in the life of all which has suffered vast and sudden changes in the period of pandemic and is destined, in all probability, to remain altered in future, is that of **work**. This is an area that constitutes a central point, as well as a starting point, of the Social Doctrine of the Church. Those who have responsibility in the field of work are and will be faced with truly dramatic choices. Just one example, that of distance working and home-office: favoring it, as is evident now, seems to be winning in terms of benefits, not only economic but also for the impact on the natural environment and for the undoubted advantage that it has for many people who no longer have to spend hours commuting to work. It is also true, however, that the consequences for these same employees and also the production system are and can be very serious in terms of the number vacancies, which will decrease, at least in the short term, due to the increase of digitization; in terms of commercial activities that revolve around offices now deserted or where only a very small number of staff works; in terms of human relations, friendships that are formed and maintained in the workplace. Let alone that the lack of physical contact and exchange can lead us to overlook important personal details, to jump to conclusions, and risk *cauterizing* consciences.²⁰ In short, in many ways, the culture of work is one of the biggest challenges in the future.

Without ignoring the troubles caused by the forced staying together of all family members at home throughout the day, the cessation of usual work procedures and the acquisition of new ways of carrying them out, however, have made positive changes in family dynamics, at least in southern European countries, where the months of the lock-down saw a rather new phenomenon for those parts of the world: a growing number of fathers taking care of their children. It is to be hoped that this phenomenon will stay with us. This could foster a new sense of fatherhood but also a new balance in the **male-female relationships** that should be urgently established.

Aware as I am of having omitted many other possible observations, my final remark is about the **sensitivity for the health of the planet and respect for creation**. It is certain that our current levels of consumption of raw materials, energy, water, and food as well as the mode of land use are not sustainable and that their effect on the climate change is predominant. But more than that, during the time of pandemic, when we have been locked in our homes, when our movements have been limited if not entirely prohibited, we have also witnessed a return of nature to our daily lives. We were looking for cleaner air and green spaces to let the body and mind breathe... as well as to walk the dog. There has been an increased awareness that we need to change the way we treat nature, produce, consume, live, work, eat, heat, travel, and transport goods.

¹⁹ Idem, *General Audience*, 19 August 2020, at <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200819_udienza-generale.html>, 23 January 2021.

²⁰ See Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, no. 49.

It is here that the **Christian proposal**, the proposal of justice and peace, finds its place. This is the proposal of the *culture of care*, of caring for ourselves, for our relationship with God, for our relationship with others, who are all brothers because they are all children of God, and with creation.²¹ It is the culture of care that Pope Francis proposed in terms of **integral ecology** in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, that is to say, an ecology that goes hand in hand with environmental ecology, centered on the care of creation, an economic and social ecology, attentive to all men and women, in particular the poorest. An ecology understood in this way, which is inseparable from the common good, pays respect to human dignity and at the same time safeguards the ecosystem. Of course, in order to apply it fully, we must subscribe to another logic, a logic that requires us to move away from a vision in which our neighbors are considered a group of distant individuals instead of brothers and sisters; a logic that also requires us to rethink the ethics of international relations because justice demands respect for individual rights as well as social rights and the rights of peoples.²² As Pope Francis reminded us in Nagasaki, today real and lasting peace is only possible *on the basis of a global ethic of solidarity and cooperation in the service of a future shaped by interdependence and shared responsibility in the whole human family*.²³

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²¹ See idem, *A Culture of Care as a Path to Peace*, no. 1, 6.

²² See idem, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 126-127.

²³ Idem, *Address on Nuclear Weapons*, Nagasaki, 24 November 2019, at <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2019/documents/papa-francesco_20191124_messaggio-arminucleari-nagasaki.html>, 23 January 2021.

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