

## Being Human in the Coronavirus Era

Duncan MacLaren

For many of us, the worst part of the coronavirus crisis is the social distancing that is required to stop the spread. It means that grandparents are separated from grandchildren; that people in love cannot touch one another; that all spots where people socialise have to be closed, including churches, schools, theatres, pubs and bingo halls; that we do a version of the dance of death around supermarkets trying to stock up while avoiding other shoppers. Timothy Radcliffe OP, the former Master of the Dominicans, described touch as “the nourishment of our humanity” yet it has become now the possible passing on of a deadly virus.

It is a virus which has the ability to undermine our very humanity given that we are radically relational, caught up in a web of obligations to others, summed up in the term derived from Catholic Social Teaching, ‘the common good’. The South African theologian, Albert Nolan, says that struggling for the common good is actually fulfilling the will of God since it is “whatever is best for the whole human family or the whole community of living beings or the whole universe in its grand unfolding. We are not isolated individuals. We are parts of a greater whole and it is the whole that determines the very existence of the parts”.<sup>1</sup>

The other principle of Catholic Social Teaching which comes to mind is human dignity. We have seen this undermined in the coronavirus era by scuffles in supermarkets over toilet rolls, by the furious stockpiling of essential goods such as hand sanitisers and eggs, and by the richer countries (so far) forgetting the plight of countries in the global South who are trying to fight the spread of the virus and to care for those affected with inadequate health systems.

This last point vividly came into my consciousness recently when the flush on my toilet failed. The management firm of my block of flats in the centre of Glasgow rang the only plumber working in the area for me but he said it wasn’t an emergency because I could flush with a bucket of water. It had the same effect on me as Proust’s *madeleine*. My mind went back to the many instances I had used this method of flushing a pan in large parts of Africa, Latin America and Asia because there was no alternative there. It didn’t occur to me in Scotland because of my being used to a life largely unknown by the majority of the people I had been serving for more than thirty years through working with SCIAF, Caritas

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Nolan OP, *Jesus Today: A Spirituality of Radical Freedom*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Boos, 2006) 188.

Internationalis and the Australian Catholic University. My focus changed from myself to ask how would the many countries I had worked in or visited to see projects supported by Caritas Scotland or Caritas members throughout the world cope, given the financial and infrastructural constraints, and the Western focus on self?

The inequalities we have allowed to grow in our world through what Pope Francis describes as ‘an economy which kills’, are about to cause a huge harvest of death in so-called developing countries unless we respond. The Lenten campaigns of our Caritas members as well as our colleagues in CIDSE have been victims of the coronavirus but SCIAF/Caritas Scotland will still be contributing to a fund to allow their partners to fight against the virus and care for those affected and infected – something followed by all members of Caritas Europe, I am sure. Yet it seems from the vast coverage of the pandemic that we Westerners are almost totally focused on ourselves, yet we have to be in solidarity with all humanity, especially the most deprived.

So, in this era of the coronavirus, how should we human beings respond? In this time when we have to keep apart from one another in order to survive and for the virus to be contained, surely our eyes should not be on ourselves alone but be cast further afield to those countries which do not have flushing toilets for the majority, which do not possess the funds to tackle the virus in any meaningful way, where particularly the poorest live in close proximity to one another and cannot have the luxury of social distancing.

And in this era of the coronavirus, what are people of faith urged to do? The Lord invites us, as Pope Francis said in his Extraordinary Moment of Prayer on 27<sup>th</sup> March, “in the midst of our tempest, ....to reawaken and put into practice that solidarity and hope capable of giving strength, support and meaning to these hours when everything seems to be floundering.....and to allow new forms of hospitality fraternity and solidarity[to flourish]”. Now we have the time to help even from our living rooms – to support our Caritas members with increased generosity, to pray for all those affected, and to show acts of solidarity and hospitality with them, reminding our politicians that some of us care not just for our own people but for all human beings.

Fr Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator SJ, the President of the Jesuit Conference of Africa and Madagascar, wrote recently that the Church of post-coronavirus has to open the doors to “a new Pentecost that blows social distances away and

frees consciences of bureaucratic, clericalistic and hierarchical structures and certainties in which we were schooled to place our trust”.

We are being called to be Samaritans to our immediate neighbours as well as those beyond our shores. We are urged to follow Pope Francis in avoiding any superstitious moralistic rhetoric of this pandemic but seeing in it the unveiling of social truths – that health care should be free for everyone and requires constant adequate funding; that the vulnerable always have to come first in society; and that our Church has to change in the ways put forward by Fr Orobator - and that, in the recent words of Cardinal Tagle, the rich world should forgive the debts of the poorest countries to allow them to save lives and their economy in these unprecedented times. It is, for us, our world and our Church, not going to be business as usual when the plague has gone.

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