



CATHOLIC ARCHDIOCESE OF TIKOLOHO E KATHOLIKE EA ISIFUNDABHISHOBHI SASE JOHANNESBURG

PRIVATE BAG X10 • DOORNFONTEIN • 2028
CHANCERY • 186 NUGGET STREET • BEREA • 2198
TEL: (011) 402-6400 • FAX: (011) 402-6406
E-MAIL ADDRESS: info@catholicjhb.org.za
WEBSITE: www.catholicjhb.org.za

COVID-19 AND THE EMPTY CHURCHES

A PASTORAL LETTER TO THE FAITHFUL OF THE ARCHDIOCESE OF JOHANNESBURG

SAVING LIVES

Coronavirus, a mercilessly devastating illness that spreads itself via droplets from person to person, has turned the whole world upside down. The world has virtually been brought to a grinding halt. Borders are sealed. There is no travel by air, sea, rail or road. The police with the help of the army have been ordered to enforce a crushing lockdown and only allow movement of those with appropriate permits.

The sole purpose of the Declaration of the National State of Disaster by Government is to save lives. Government has put at the disposal of the Nation every resource available in order to save the lives of its people from the insidious assault of COVID-19. Government leaders consider it their sacred duty and privilege to persuade every citizen to recognise the gravity of the threat imposed by Covid-19 and consequently to follow the directives aimed at fighting the disease. The gift of human life is “like a pearl of great price. The merchant who finds it sells everything he owns and buys it” (Mt.13:4.5). This is virtually what the Government has done. R500 billion will be raised in order to respond to the challenge of the deadly Corona virus.

THE INESTIMABLE VALUE OF LIFE

The aspiration to preserve, protect and enrich human life is at the heart of the Gospel message, hence the words of Jesus: “I came that you may have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn.10:10). This then, is the fullness of life which “far exceeds the dimensions of people’s earthly existence because it consists in sharing the very life of God” (John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, no. 2:1-2). According to John Paul II, it is this exceptional nature of the calling of human beings that highlights the *sacred* value of human life, its *greatness* and its *inestimable* value (*Evangelium*

Vitae, no. 2:1-2). In light of the incomparable value of life, the church fully supports the selfless efforts by Government to keep the threat of the Corona virus at bay.

EMPTY CHURCHES AT EASTER

A lockdown on the eve of Easter celebrations meant that there would be no liturgical celebrations of any kind. Everybody is expected to stay at home in order to minimise the unwanted spread of the virus. Easter is a major religious event in the Christian liturgical calendar. It is during the Easter *Triduum* that congregations hear about the narratives of creation *ex nihilo*, the enslavement and liberation of the Israelites in Egypt, the covenant between God and His people, the institution of the Eucharist and the priesthood, and finally, the tragic death and the glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Easter worship commingle lamentation, praise and thanksgiving together.

This year, 2020, the Easter celebrations would have been particularly significant because worship would have been offered to God amidst fear, frustration, anger, uncertainty and indeed the real threat of COVID-19 that has already devoured more than 300,000 around the world. This year's Passover memorial service would have been a poignant affair that symbolically linked Jesus' Gethsemane's experience with the painful death of so many who unexpectedly succumbed to the Corona virus. This year's Easter gathering would have been unique because a national lament in one country would have echoed throughout the entire world, for the whole world is in the grip of the same merciless disease.

It would have been a consoling and healing gesture to present our murmurings and complaints to God in the presence of a community in His house rather than as individuals or in the isolation of our private homes in obedience to the curt but welcome injunction: "Stay at home and be safe." There is a collective complaint against God as to why His "wrath blazes out against His own people", His own inheritance (Ex.32.10). Is COVID-19 an expression of His anger, a punishment for the sins of our ancestors or our contemporaries, or a mere accident in the affairs of nations? Is God not "a God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in mercy and faithfulness?" (Ex.34:6, Eph.2:4). The very celebration of Easter is a strong reminder of God the Father's love to humanity made manifest in the mission of His Son, Jesus Christ who died on the Cross and rose on the third day (Lk.24:7; John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia* 1.1). An Easter communal service would have given worshipping communities an opportunity to reconcile their state of terror by a virus with their image of a God "rich in mercy." The Easter

services would have promoted a strong sense of solidarity in the face of a pandemic instead of people seeing themselves as powerless individuals in the face of a rampant and destructive disease. Communal services would have helped to release repressed emotions of unbelief, doubt, confusion, fear, frustration and helplessness. The temporary repeal of the human right to gather and to worship is based on the simple calculation that in the gatherings of worship, congregants are virtually on top of each other. There is no social distancing. They give each other a kiss of peace which might literally become a kiss of death because of the possible infection by the Corona virus. Saving lives trumps social and religious gatherings. This is the sacrifice expected from every single individual in order to protect life while scientists are in a desperate rush to find a vaccine.

THE SCOURGE OF JOBLESSNESS

The Covid-19, once set in motion became the Pandora's Box that brought into the open ills of society that have been lurking in the background. The affliction of Covid-19 forced the hand of the authorities to declare a National State of Disaster. As a result, the already sickly economy ground to a halt. Industry stopped functioning. Businesses closed. People are only allowed to do shopping and attend to their medical needs. Otherwise they are restricted to their homes. Within a month of the attack of the Corona virus the lives of many people have been thrown into disarray. Many employers did not have enough money to pay their employees. Some businesses were destined to fold-up. Many simply lost their jobs, thus bringing hardship, disappointment and unhappiness to many families. This is not the kind of fasting people had in mind during this year's Lenten Season. Those who have lost their jobs join the 29% who are already unemployed. Job-loss and unemployment bring hardship and tension within families. Job-loss threatens the livelihood of families. Many employers appreciate the loyalty and commitment of their employees and do their utmost to keep them employed even if it is at a reduced salary. To many an employee, work is a "*sine qua non*." Work is an essential activity that makes a person to be a person. Work enables people to carry out their responsibility of caring for their families.

John Paul II, maintains that in doing work, men and women respond to God's injunction that they "subdue the earth" (Gen.1.28). Work performance therefore "reflects the very action of the Creator of the universe (*Laborem Exercens*, 4.2). John Paul II makes three other salient points about work. Human work "makes life more human" (3.2). It facilitates personal fulfillment (7.3). It expresses and increases the dignity of the worker (4.2; 9.3). The ubiquitous

presence of the Corona virus has effectively led to joblessness. The long term effects of unemployment threaten to undermine the dignity and confidence of those without full-time employment. Their dreams for caring for their families and of leading a prosperous life are shattered. Their contribution to society becomes minimal. The scourge of unemployment leads to homelessness, poverty and a plethora of other social ills. While such concerns may not be uppermost in the minds of some employers, it would be to the benefit of the employees and society if the employers could walk an extra mile to fight tooth and nail to retain their employees in their employment.

It certainly would be helpful to recall the many years of a fruitful working partnership. It would not be unreasonable for those workers who have always considered their work and loyalty as an investment to expect some support now that they have fallen on hard times due to an uninvited and disruptive Corona virus. Employers are hard-nosed businessmen and women. They are known to possess attributes of efficiency, discipline and industriousness. They are also expected to have an attribute of mercy. Often employers know that they themselves and their families would not be able to live on what they pay their workers. Justice is a desirable virtue. Employers with a conscience and an attribute of mercy are a true blessing. Mercy is not just a religious attribute. It is also a genuine attribute of true humanity. Human beings share this attribute with God.

The Government has ostensibly put its normal business on hold in order to lead the Nation against the invasion of the Corona virus. It has had to decide between the serious disruption of the economy with devastating consequences and a total engagement in a war against COVID-19. The strict regime of “stay at home” revealed or perhaps brought into the open, some of the more serious societal challenges. Apart from the millions of workers who suddenly found themselves out of work because of the lockdown, the already 10 million unemployed people become more visible. So too the homeless, the child-headed families etc. To many, the lockdown spelled ruin. Some claim that the spectre of hunger has become more threatening than COVID-19 itself. Multitudes of poor people are no longer able “to glean and gather the ears of corn after the reapers” (Ruth2:7).

LEGENDARY GENEROSITY

Apart from the R500 billion commitment by Government, a Solidarity fund was set up and the public has been invited to make contributions. The Executive of Government took a pay cut

for 3 months and encouraged other executives to do likewise. This token has not gone unnoticed. It is a good example to be emulated especially when it comes to political leaders who are not always known for their magnanimity. The words of Christ come to mind: “I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you” (Jn.13:15). It is incumbent upon those who occupy positions of leadership to remember that their calling is “not to be served but to serve” (Mt.20:28). Foundations, Philanthropists, businesses and individuals pledged to contribute generously in order to support the economy and to alleviate the plight of the needy. The many generous givers, big and small, across the country, have shown themselves to be the true neighbours, the Good Samaritans to the needy whose luckless condition has been exposed by the marauding disease that first terrified people in Wuhan, China (Lk.11.29-37). Genuine concern for the neighbour writes Pope Benedict XVI “is a path that leads to the encounter with God” (*Deus Caritas Est*, no. 17). The many men and women who are moved by the plight of others went beyond their own immediate personal concerns, are a genuine reflection of the biblical shepherd who went after the lost sheep (Jn.10.1-13). They can take encouragement from the words of Christ that: “in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me” (Mt.25:40).

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN DURING LOCKDOWN

The lockdown has also shown South Africa to be still a deeply patriarchal and violent society. Many men still lord it over women. This primitive and morally reprehensible attitude still prevails in spite of the affirmation that in Law, men and women are both equal. Christianity teaches the equality of man and woman. Many men who exchange marriage vows of equality, of belonging together, of becoming one person, do not appear to believe in what they say. They do not seem to believe that in Baptism, they become “a new creation” where male and female cease to exist (Gal.3:28). “Stay at home” in a restricted space for an unusually long period of time appears to create an opportunity for some men to become violent towards women. What is difficult to break is the patriarchal mould that women are subservient to men and the fact that many women regrettably still accept the status quo in spite of the growing opposition to patriarchy. Breaking with tradition demands a completely new understanding of reality. Walter Kasper has this to say about the reality of a woman: “she does not receive value, dignity, prestige or position through man. In herself she has value and dignity” (Kasper, W. *The Position of Woman*, p.58). The theoretical recognition that values and virtues of a woman reside inherently in a woman without any reference to a man, has not altered the attitudes of men toward women. That recognition ought to be accompanied by a thorough subversion of

the masculine “vices” of domineering, defiance, superiority and power. Virtues of decency, respect for women, honour, self-mastery and dignity, are to be vigorously promoted. It is also to be noted that prison sentences have not always served as a deterrent. If a fraction of the resources mounted against COVID-19 were dedicated to uprooting violence against women, the change in the attitude of both men and women would be remarkable.

CRIME DURING LOCKDOWN

During the lockdown, there has been some break-ins and looting. But what has been most unusual has been the vandalising and setting alight of more than 200 schools across the country. In some cases equipment has been stolen. In other cases, the schools were set alight without any break-ins. Wanton destruction of property appears to be the South African way of expressing deep seated grievances and of rebelling against society. COVID-19 and its “stay at home” restriction, offer an excuse and an opportunity to commit crime. Crime is generally said to be caused by the high unemployment rate due to the sluggish economic growth. It is also caused by the absence of clean governance i.e. by corruption, and by the limited State capacity to enforce compliance (Steinberg, J. (ed) *Crime Wave*, 1-12, 2001).

But the burning of schools is done by young men who appear frustrated, angry and alienated. They appear to have an axe to grind. They are destructive because they seem to have no purpose in life. They claim that society does not care about their plight. Their relationship with society is at best tenuous. They therefore do not feel responsible for the public good. Schools are about the welfare and advancement of the next generation. They feel that the well-being of the next generation is not their responsibility. They feel they have no sense of shame and have nothing to lose even if they were to be caught and imprisoned. The lockdown has highlighted this disturbing aspect of our society that cries to high heaven for attention. Some young people are less schooled and probably unemployable. Others are schooled but less skilled and find it difficult to find work. The youth feel that they are the part or group in society without dignity. In St. Paul’s analogy of the body “God has arranged the body so that more dignity is given to the parts which are without it, and so that there may be no disagreements inside the body, but that each part may be equally concerned for all the others” (I Cor.12:25). Unemployment remains the biggest burden for young people. COVID-19 has not brought them any ray of hope.

DISSENTING VOICES

There are those who now feel strongly that the lockdown has lasted for too long (7 weeks). They stubbornly wish to ignore the advice that infections are still on the rise and that it is desirable to see the number of infections drop. Some argue that they are suffocating inside their homes and wish to move about in order to breathe. Others agitate for the resumption of economic activity, and that the soldiers be ordered to return to the barracks, *quam primum*. These rebels ignore conveniently the major reason why the restrictions were imposed in the first place, to save lives. They ignore the growing ravages of COVID-19. They are friends of those who seek that cigarettes and alcohol be unbanned during the lockdown. The fickleness and recklessness of the rebel group is reminiscent of our impatient and headstrong ancestors in the faith. Moses had hardly gone to the mountain of Sinai to receive the two Tablets of the Testimony when they complained to Aaron that Moses had been gone for far too long. They demanded that he make them “a god to go ahead of us.” From the gold rings of their womenfolk, Aaron made them an effigy of a golden calf (Ex.31:1-4) in order to deal with their impatience, frustration and lack of faith. It makes ample sense to be concerned with the welfare of the majority of the citizens rather than with narrow specific self-interests. It is equally critical to find a delicate balance between saving lives and relaunching economic activity.

LOOKING FOR THE SCAPEGOAT

The widespread fear and indeed the devastation of the Corona virus (in other parts of the world) cannot be seen as the work of a God who seeks to pass judgement on the human race. Disasters have come and gone, the Black Death, the Spanish flu, etc. COVID-19 will God forbid, also have its successors. The sealing of borders and the stopping of international flights appear to have come in a little too late, like locking the stable door after the horse has bolted. Corona virus is now found virtually in every corner of the globe. Human failure, tardiness and sinfulness creep in at this juncture. It has at times been observed that “there is frightful human evil at the root of much suffering and absurd death” (Power, D. *Calling up the Dead* in Concilium 1993 (3)). The lockdown, in spite of its negative impact, has created space for both individual and family prayer.

EMPTY TOMB AND EMPTY CHURCHES

When level One permits religious gatherings, Christian believers will link the victims of COVID-19 and their families with the painful crucifixion of Jesus Christ. We will celebrate our liturgies in solidarity with the dead, not in their anonymity, but as deceased persons whose hope is brought to fruition in the resurrection of Christ the Redeemer of humankind. To date, the number of people who have died in some European countries is about 30 on average in

spite of the gallant efforts made to reduce the rate of infection. South Africa's number of deaths is at 300. The country is yet to reach its peak. Many countries continue to stare death in the face while they anxiously wait for the discovery of a vaccine. The words of Job could not have been more relevant: "If we take happiness from God's hand, must we not take sorrow too?" (1:10).

"GOOD JOB"

Much has been said about the health workers who have risked their own lives and that of their families by serving people who have been infected by COVID-19. The concern centred on the lack of protective gear for them. Hopefully by now they would have received all the necessary protective clothing. Some health workers have lost their lives after being infected by the patients they served in hospitals. This no doubt has had a devastating effect on their families. Many knew of the danger but still continued to help others to recover from their illness. Doctors and nurses take care of the sick because it is their job. True. But there is something more. In carrying out their duties, they also make the infirmity of others their own. Theirs is a beautiful act of self-giving. Under these circumstances the words of Christ have a strong echo: "A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends' (Jn.15:13). Alicia Keys in her beautiful song, "Good Job", calls people like these health workers, "everyday heroes." In her moving song, she expresses a message of gratitude and encouragement that "we are all in this together."

We are "each other's keeper."

+Buti Tlhagale o.m.i.



**Archbishop of Johannesburg
Cathedral of Christ the King,
10/05/2020**