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The coronavirus pandemichas made an unprecedented impact on our daily lives and called forth a great deal of practical advice from the medical profession on how to manage it, both physically and emotionally. We can find further guidance in dealing with this tragedy in Christian teaching and spirituality. As followers of the crucified and risen Christ, we are called to exercise the virtue of compassion as we face the immense human suffering generated throughout our global village: hundreds of thousands infected and tens of thousands dead; the poor and marginalized who always suffer the most in tragic circumstances; the infected who cannot access proper medical treatment; refugees who cannot practice social distancing; those in our affluent country who are suffering economically, including small business owners and the rising number of unemployed; homebound persons dealing with increased anxiety; and faithful believers deprived of the common worship that sustains them. The Latin root for compassion means to suffer with. For us Christians, the supreme example of compassion is the Incarnation, in which God our Father has sent his Son to share our journey and suffer with us the hardships of the human condition. As he walked the earth, Jesus extended compassionate care to all he met, including the sick and marginalized. He left us a command and an example to do for others what he did for us.

The pandemic has created new opportunities to follow Christ’s command: for example, calling or writing persons in nursing homes who cannot have visitors; shopping for the homebound; sending an encouraging word to the depressed and discouraged; assisting the unemployed applying for government aid; and praying for all those suffering in any way from the pandemic.

In addition to compassion, the rapid spread of Covid-19 all over the globe serves as a stark reminder of our common humanity and the obligation to practice the virtue of solidarity. In chapter four of the book of Genesis, we find the story of Cain, who tried to avoid personal responsibility for murdering his brother Abel by saying to God, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” God punished Cain for his evil deed, but the attempt to avoid or neglect responsibility for others has remained a common human temptation. In the United States, there is a strong strain of individualism that connects true freedom with distance from others, avoiding binding obligations, keeping options open, pulling our own strings and doing our own thing. Popular culture celebrates the cowboy who rides off on his horse, free of any ties, and the easy rider who takes off on his motorcycle, free to go where he wills. The pandemic has revealed the fundamental fallacy of this type of doctrinaire individualism. As one medical doctor working to manage the crisis has repeated: “It has never been clearer that we are responsible for one another.” Medical experts tell us we cannot contain the natural progression of the disease unless we work together for the common good. The virus challenges our cultural emphasis on freedom from obligations to others and prompts us to recognize that true freedom is freedom for, for mutual relationships with others and for a life of service.

One way Catholic Social Teaching addresses this issue is under the heading of “solidarity,” which includes an emphasis on the fundamental unity of the human family and encouragement to do our part to enhance that unity. We are all members of the one family of God, sons and daughters of our heavenly Father. By his death and resurrection, Christ has made the gift of salvation open to all people and by his good example has taught us to care for one another. The Holy Spirit, poured out upon the whole human family, unites us by bonds stronger than all that divides us, distributing to each of us gifts meant to serve not our own individual interests but the common good.

Contemporary Christian anthropology sees human beings not as isolated individuals doing their own thing but as interdependent persons, social beings, who grow through personal relationships and participation in community life. We develop important moral virtues, such as prudence and patience, in the give and take of everyday family life. We find fulfillment in loving relationships based on equality and mutuality. We achieve self-actualization by using our talents to serve the public interest. We grow spiritually by drawing on the resources of the Church and contributing to the well-being of our parish.

The virtue of solidarity inclines us to recognize the fundamental unity of the human family and also to respect the rights and needs of individual persons. It prompts us to collaborate with others in meeting the needs of people who are suffering, always remembering they are not mere statistics or numbers, but individual persons with a face, a name, and a history. The good news is that the necessary isolation imposed by the virus has unleashed a more communal aspect of our culture, the practice of voluntarily coming together to solve a common problem. In popular culture, the superhero Batman and his sidekick Robin, who use their highly developed human skills to save the good people from the bad guys, represent the American ideal of helping persons in need. This kind of civic impulse was at work in the original establishment of labor unions, in rural neighbors helping to rebuild a damaged barn, in the growing of Victory Gardens during the Second World War and in the thousands of mutual aid groups forming around the country today, some with the explicit aim of building solidarity, not just extending charity.

This traditional American impulse to act in solidarity has been very evident during the crisis. Aware of a number of elderly vulnerable persons in her neighborhood, a healthy young woman passed out fliers offering to do grocery shopping for those reluctant to go out. She was happy to get a number of requests and surprised at how many others offered to join her in the project. They now have a fledgling mutual aid group that is bringing people in the neighborhood closer together.

For some Americans, the pandemic has made it clearer than ever before that we are indeed responsible for one another. Catholic Social Teaching offers a solid theological basis for this fundamental insight as well as motivation for practicing the virtue of solidarity.

The current pandemic has generated more social isolation and disruption than we have ever experienced in our country. Millions of citizens are confined to their homes except for necessary excursions. Thousands of workers are out of a job and many others are working from home. Children are at home because of the closing of their schools where they received free breakfasts and lunches. So many businesses and activities are closed, including restaurants, bars, gyms, theaters, and concerts. Sports fans are dealing with the cancellation of local games, March Madness, the NBA and NHL seasons, the delay of the baseball season and the postponement until next year of the summer Olympic Games in Japan. Most religious services have been temporarily cancelled and some Catholic dioceses have cancelled Masses all the way through Easter.

The isolation and inactivity imposed by the pandemic provides opportunities for spiritual growth, with guidance from our Christian faith. First of all, it now more important than ever to maintain good habits, as much as possible: regular exercise, healthy eating habits and proper sleep. For Christians, following the advice of medical experts on ways to limit the spread of the virus, (staying at home, social distancing and washing hands) is not just good hygiene but is a moral responsibility rooted in Christ’s command to love our neighbor. We have to remind young people, who naturally think they are invincible, that they are not exempt from this ethical imperative to protect more vulnerable citizens and avoid overwhelming the healthcare system. Families have a moral obligation to provide for their needs, but should avoid hoarding items others need in contending with the pandemic.

Since prolonged isolation inevitably causes greater than usual friction and irritability, families need to develop coping skills: for example, getting some physical distance by taking turns going to the store or taking a walk alone. It might help to have a separate place in the house to go to when tensions increase or arguments get overheated. Frank conversations about personal experiences of cabin fever could help as well as sharing fears about the future.

Pope Francis has frequently advised us to spend more time in personal reflection, prayerfully considering how we can respond more faithfully to our baptismal call to holiness. Now that some of us are not as busy as usual, we could use the extra time to develop the habit of regular self-examination. We could, for example, plan how to practice greater forbearance and patience in dealing with the foibles and limitations of our loved ones, which may be magnified in these difficult times.

We could also try to develop the virtue of gratitude by consciously considering the sacrifices of so many: doctors, nurses and first responders risking their own lives to care for the sick; researchers working overtime to find a cure and eventually develop a vaccine; persons who volunteered to receive experimental drugs; friends and neighbors going out of their way to help the vulnerable.

Given extra time, we could seize the opportunity to deepen our prayer life: spending more time in prayer; learning a new meditation method such as *Lectio divina,* which involves a slower more prayerful reading of a scripture passage (a suggestion: start reading the Gospel of Luke and when something strikes you, stop and reflect on it as long as it engages you and then return to reading); devoting more time in silence listening to God and less in telling God what we need and want; praying the rosary with greater attention to meditating on the joyful, sorrowful, glorious mysteries as well as the luminous mysteries introduced by John Paul II (the baptism of Jesus, his first miracle at Cana, his proclamation of the kingdom, his transfiguration, and his institution of the Eucharist); and giving more attention to adoration and gratitude along with petitions.

Liturgically, families could watch the celebration of Mass on TV or live streaming through their parish. They could have a dialogue homily on the Sunday readings, easily available online. They could give greater attention to prayers before meals, perhaps taking turns expressing their feelings before God and giving thanks for blessings. Praying together could lead to more time in personal conversations which are more leisurely and fruitful.

We are dealing with the increase of infections and deaths during the Lenten season, the traditional time for penance in preparation for the joyful celebration of Easter. This year, Lent has its own unavoidable forms of fasting from the ordinary enjoyments of life: a shared meal with family and friends in a restaurant; watching sporting events on television; going to a concert, play or movie; having a drink with friends at a local bar; and going to Mass at the parish church. Accepting these limitations gracefully could be a very fruitful Lenten penance. On the positive side, Lent this year could provide more time for Bible study and spiritual reading as well as participating in on-line Lenten devotions, including Stations of the Cross.

Some people, especially the older and more vulnerable, may be moved to think about death as they hear about more fatalities. It is good to keep in mind fundamental Christian teachings. For us, death is not the end of life but the passage to a richer glorious life with God forever. Facing death is not a morbid activity but a liberating exercise, which can move us to make the most of the limited days we have on the earth, confident that all of our good efforts are never wasted but are rewarded in the life of heaven. Our doctrine of the Communion of Saints teaches us that our deceased loved ones remain close to us as we make our journey to be with them in our heavenly home, where there are no more tears and the deepest longings of our hearts are totally fulfilled.

Finally, the severity of this crisis reminds us of the importance of the virtue of hope, which is not based on an optimistic view of future developments but on trust in the merciful God, who promised the final victory of good over all evil. The Father revealed by Christ does not inflict suffering on the world as a punishment or a warning, but assists us in the fight against the inevitable sufferings of a material, evolving world led by human beings who are capable of sinful actions. Trusting in God encourages us to detect signs of hope in our troubled world: for example the small business owner who borrowed thousands of dollar to keep his employees on the payroll; the woman who came to the aid of an elderly couple in a car afraid to go into the grocery store and bought items on their shopping list and put them in their trunk; the retired doctors and nurses who have returned to work to assist over-burdened hospital staffs; the infected Italian priest who died after giving up the respirator his parishioners bought for him to a younger patient; the health care providers who have worked overtime without the best protective gear to care for victims of the virus. Eyes of faith detect the Holy Spirit at work in these kinds of cases, which reinforce our hope that the merciful God will bring, in ways mysterious, good out of this horrendous pandemic.