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LA STAMPA – An Exclusive Interview with Pope Francis on
Coronavirus Desease

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by **Domenico Agasso JR**

Pope Francis: “Don’t be afraid”

The Holy Father speaks about his pain in these days of crisis because of the virus: “The darkness that entered our homes will disappear, with wounds in the heart a united humanity will rise again”.

“Here we cry, and we suffer. All of us. We can only get out of this situation together, as a whole humanity”. For this reason, we have “to look at each other with a sense of solidarity” and act accordingly. Pope Francis is following with concern the development of the Coronavirus emergency. However, on the phone on Monday, March 16 he also wants to instill hope that the “light” will come and will illuminate the darkness, which “entered everybody’s home”, in the form of pain and concerns. After this suspended time, it will be “a bit like a post-war period”, the Pontiff warns. We will have to rebuild. On four important pillars: “the roots”, which are represented by the grandparents and the elderly; “the memory” of these very surreal days; “the brotherhood” among all human beings; “the hope, which never disappoints”.

Your Holiness, Easter is approaching “behind closed doors” with celebrations that will take place only via web, television and radio: for many devotees this will be a double suffering. How should we live this Easter while in the midst of the pandemic?

“With penance, compassion and hope. And humbleness, because many times we forget that in life there are “dark zones”, the dark moments. We think they can happen only to someone else. On the contrary, this is a dark time for everybody, none excluded.”

During the Angelus, you stated that Lent can help find a meaning to what is happening: how?

“The preparation time to Easter, with prayers and fasting, trains us to look at the others with solidarity, especially those who suffer. While waiting for the glow of that light that will illuminate everything and everybody again.”

Is it particularly important to pray in this period?

“I think of the Apostles in the storm when they invoke Jesus: “Master, we are drowning”. The prayer makes us understand our vulnerability. It is the scream of the poors, of those who are drowning, who feel threatened, alone. And in a difficult situation, desperate, it is important to know that there is the Lord to hold on to”.

How can God help us?

“God supports us in many ways. God gives us strength and closeness; in the same way He did with the disciples who asked for help in the storm. Or when He gave His hand to Pietro who was drowning.”

Where can the nonbelievers find consolation and encouragement?

I don't want to make a distinction between believers and nonbelievers. We are all human beings and as human beings we are all in the same boat. And no human thing must be alien to a Christian. Here we cry because we suffer. All of us. What helps us is synergy, mutual collaboration, the sense of responsibility and the spirit of sacrifice that is generated in many places. We don't have to make a distinction between believers and nonbelievers, let's go to the root: humanity. Before God we are all children".

Among the Covid-19 tragedies there are the people who die alone, in isolation, without the love of their relatives who cannot get close in order not to be infected. These are heartbreaking scenes that are happening on a daily basis in the hospitals, in Bergamo, Brescia and Cremona. Some, just before dying, send their final goodbyes to the wife, husband, children, through the nurses. What are the thoughts crossing your mind and your heart?

"These days, they told me a story that really struck and grieved me, also because it represents what is happening in the hospitals. An elderly woman realised she was about to die and wanted to say goodbye to her loved ones: the nurse took the phone and video-called the woman's granddaughter, so the old woman saw her granddaughter's face and could die with this consolation. This is the ultimate need to have a hand taking your hand. To have a last gesture of companionship. And many nurses accompany this extreme wish with their ears, by listening to the pain of loneliness, holding hands. The pain of those who left without saying goodbye becomes a wound in the heart of those who remain. I thank all these nurses, doctors and volunteers who despite the extraordinary fatigue bend with patience and kindness of their heart to make up for the forced absence of the patients' families".

"Your" Piedmont is among the regions that were mostly affected by the virus. Recently, because of a cold, you could not come back here: what would you like to say to the Piedmontese people?

" "The Consolata" (the Pope speaks in Piedmontese) "protector of our ancient race, guard me, until death takes me: like the water of a river, life passes, but you, Madonna, you remain". Nino Costa's poetry-prayer to the Madonna Consolata. This more than anything. "Like the water of a river, life passes, but you, Madonna, you remain". I would say to the Piedmontese people to pray the Consolata, with faith and trust".

This global emergency is also characterised by a solidarity network, consisting of thousands of people who are making sacrifices for others' wellbeing. When everything is over, could this solidarity have served anything for the future?

"To remind humans, once and for all, that humankind is one community. And how important and decisive is universal brotherhood. We have to think that it will be a bit like a post-war period. There will no longer be "the other", but it will be "us". Because we can only get out of this situation together."

What should we re-start with as human beings?

"We will have to look at the roots even more: the grandparents, the elderly. To build a real brotherhood among all of us. To remember this difficult experience we lived all together. And to move forward with hope, which never disappoints. These will be the keywords to start again: roots, memory, brotherhood and hope"

Translated by Valeria Piantoni

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