

THE CHURCH AND THE PLAGUE

O God, who willest not the death of the sinner but that he should repent: welcome with pardon Thy people's return to Thee: and so long as they are faithful in Thy service, do Thou in Thy clemency withdraw the scourge of Thy wrath. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, Thy Son...

(Collect Prayer for the Votive Mass *pro tempore mortalitatis*)

[1]

“A PESTE, FAME ET BELLO...”

As a consequence of original sin, men are subject to illness and death. It is the fate of all and in past ages nobody doubted its inevitability, even if most tried to postpone it as much as possible or to ease its sufferings. But even in Christian ages widespread pestilence and mortality sorely tested the faith of men, and many failed the test...

The contemporary world has convinced itself that men are masters of their own destinies; a conviction brought about by centuries of drifting away from God and from the consequent Christian understanding of the purpose of man's life and trials on earth, and reinforced by more recent assertions of personal freedom and self-determination. And thus, helped along by man's increasing mastery of natural forces and in an era of vaccines, sanitation and efficient medical care, men have grown confident, persuading themselves that illness and death, even if not unavoidable, could be tamed and made at least “acceptable” by suppressing their pains and accompanying anguishes.

But “a society used to thinking it controls everything from climate to gender is poorly equipped to weather the storm of unpredictability that epidemics bring.”¹ Thus when reality – today in the shape of a new, highly contagious virus – obliges us to face our essential powerlessness, our first, instinctive reaction is fear, a fear due to the lack of control brought about by disease and its attendant uncertainties and disruptions of our daily lives.

History is witness that such fears have often prompted many to manifest the basest side of our fallen nature – a selfish avoidance of the sick, the stockpiling of provisions and medications, the seeking out of scapegoats to blame for our own sufferings and, more often than not, a mass hysteria that has ended in riotous violence...

For that reason, in her penitential acts the Church prays, *From pestilence, famine and war, O Lord, deliver us!* – to be delivered not only from natural catastrophes that are beyond our control, but also from the evils of our own doing, all of which bring to the surface what is deep in the hearts of men...

But the Church has also always stressed that God, Who can bring good out of evil, permits these evils as providential means of expiation for our sins, for they become for us the opportunity to acknowledge the error of our ways, and, perhaps, even the beginning of our true conversion, while at the same time furnishing the occasion for the practice of virtues in a heroic degree.

That there is blessing we have no doubt: such inducements as the urgent putting of our souls in the state of grace if need be; the discharge of some long-neglected duty, such as making a will, paying a debt, forgiving an injury; suffering a salutary reduction of one's pride of life; being forced to face in a novel, vivid way the four last things; and being so deprived on every side that we are compelled to look to the one thing left to us, the saving of our souls. It may even be that God sends these abrupt blessings for very serious reasons, as when Catholics have grown com-

¹ Lev, Elizabeth – Williams, Thomas D. [What the Catholic Church knows about charity in times of pandemic.](#)

placent intellectually and deteriorated morally, and need to be aroused to their true business of salvation by severe awakening. Hora est iam nos de somno surgere...²

Throughout history, mankind has suffered from innumerable illnesses and often true pandemics, with all their consequent evils and disruptions.

Even into the modern age, the causes of such devastating illnesses were barely known. As a consequence, the modes of transmission were either unknown or could only be guessed at on the basis of observation and trial-and-error experiments. These, in turn, led to some tentative remedies and treatments for the sick and to equally tentative precautions for those who cared for them. A few of those remedies and precautions were useful, but most of them were either ineffectual or added new complications, or, unknowingly, even contributed to the further spread of the diseases...

From the very beginning, whatever the circumstances and the limitations of the medical knowledge of the times, as soon as pestilence swept across the lands where she was present, the Church did not hesitate to offer to the sick and the dying her own sacrificial service, in imitation of Our Lord: *Greater love than this no man hath, that a man lay down his life for his friends.*³

[2] THE EARLY CENTURIES

The first pandemic in the Christian era was the “**Antonine plague**” of 165-180, perhaps smallpox, which ravaged the Roman empire and caused more than five million dead. Soon after, in 249, the so-called “**Cyprian’s plague**” broke out, amidst an already chaotic time in the Empire and lasted until well into 271. It could have been smallpox or perhaps a disease similar to Ebola, but at its peak it caused 5,000 dead per day in Rome alone and set off the political anarchy of the 3rd century.

St. Dionysius of Alexandria witnessed the pagan reaction to the plague: *At the first onset of the disease, they pushed the sufferers away and fled from their dearest, throwing them into the roads before they were dead and treating unburied corpses as dirt, hoping thereby to avert the spread and contagion of the fatal disease; but do what they might, they found it difficult to escape.*

In his view, the plague was a providential *schooling and testing* of Christians. And their response was up to the test: *Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead.*

An early biographer tells us that St. Cyprian of Carthage encouraged the faithful to minister to the needs of all: *There is nothing remarkable in cherishing merely our own people with the due attentions of love, but that one might become perfect, he who should do something more than heathen men or publicans; overcoming evil with good, and practicing a merciful kindness like that of God, he should love his enemies as well... Thus the good was done to all men, not merely to the household of faith.*

But St. Cyprian also pointed out the providential effect of these calamities: *By the terrors of mortality and of the times, lukewarm men are heartened, the listless nerved, the sluggish awakened; deserters are compelled to return; heathens brought to believe; the congregation of established believers is called to rest; fresh and numerous champions are banded in heartier strength for the conflict, and having come into warfare in the season of death, will fight without fear of death, when the battle comes.*

² The quote is taken from a Catholic reflection on the spiritual blessings that Providence may derive from the scourge of war, but also easily applicable to illness and plague. *The Tablet* (London), 1940, August 3, p.98.

³ John 15:13.

In the pagan empire, the Christian attitude towards the sick and the dying, believers and unbelievers alike, triggered an explosive growth of Christianity. Because of their compassion in the midst of the plague, the Christians' deeds were on everyone's lips, with admiration and gratitude, and such actions brought many to the faith.

Even the last pagan emperor, Julian the Apostate, rebuked the pagan priests for falling short of the example given by Christians during another great plague, in 362. He recognized that the Christian compassion and sacrificial service was one cause behind the ascendancy of the Church.

Later, in the 6th century, "**Justinian's plague**," the bubonic plague – accompanied perhaps by other plagues, pneumonic and septicemic – arrived in Constantinople in 542. The outbreak lasted four months, but the plague continued to sweep intermittently throughout the Mediterranean world for another 225 years, with the last outbreak reported in 750. It is estimated that, over the course of the last half of the 6th century, the population of the Byzantine Empire and its neighbors declined by as much as 40%. There would be no more large-scale outbreaks of plague until the Black Death of the 14th century.⁴

In 590, Rome was ravaged by "Justinian's plague" – it even claimed the life of Pope Pelagius II. As soon as St. Gregory the Great was elected Pope, he called on God's mercy for the end of the plague by organizing a massive procession around the City, carrying an image of Our Lady and chanting the litanies. When the procession reached the Mausoleum of Hadrian, *The pope saw an angel of the Lord standing atop the castle of Crescentius, wiping a bloody sword and sheathing it. Gregory understood that that put an end to the plague, as, indeed, happened.*

In thanksgiving, St. Gregory had a statue of St. Michael placed atop the castle, as a constant reminder of the mercy of God and how He responded to the prayers and supplications of His people.⁵

[3]

MEDIEVAL AND MODERN TIMES

Plague was recurrent during the middle ages and up to the industrial age. In general, for many centuries, whatever organized medical care existed in Catholic Europe, it was offered under Church auspices, through the monasteries and religious orders.

The plague to which all others are usually compared is the "**Black Death**," the bubonic plague that swept again throughout the world between 1347 and 1354, killing up to 40-50 % of Europe's population. The mortality was such (25 million people) that many believed it to be the end of the world. Indeed, it changed the face of the European world... Bereft of laborers, the value of land declined, undermining the foundations of the feudal system and easing the way for centralized monarchies. For many, religious fervor was renewed and new manifestations of piety appeared, but others reacted with a pessimism that threw them into despair or a senseless hedonism, which were in turn reflected in the arts and literature. Still others reacted with random acts of violence against those thought to have caused the plague, not only Jews, but also people affected by other illnesses, as well as beggars and foreigners...

Amidst that upheaval, priests stepped into sickrooms, materially and spiritually assisting the sick and the dying, knowing that they faced an unseen enemy that very likely would kill them. Nonetheless, thousands of priests took those steps anyway, risking their lives to give hope and comfort to those in pain and fear.

Widespread diseases reappeared continuously throughout the world even into our own century, and every time the Church's response was the same...

⁴ Snell, Melissa. [The Sixth-Century Plague](https://thoughtco.com/the-sixth-century-plague-1789291). ThoughtCo, Feb. 11, 2020, thoughtco.com/the-sixth-century-plague-1789291.

⁵ Kosloski, Philip. <https://aleteia.org/2019/05/07/during-a-deadly-plague-pope-gregory-had-this-consoling-vision-of-st-michael-the-archangel/>

During the plague that ravaged the city of **Milan in 1567**, St. Charles Borromeo was convinced that it was permitted by God as punishment for the sins of the people, but it also offered to all an occasion for purification and conversion. Therefore, the decisive remedy was to be found in prayer and penance.

Because in their efforts to curb the contagion, the civil authorities had forbidden religious meetings and processions, St. Charles reproached them for putting all their trust in human means, without a thought for the divine. When frightened people quarantined themselves in their homes, he ordered the erection of crosses in the main squares and street junctions so that the people could attend Masses and public rogations from their windows.

He himself ministered to the sick and encouraged his clergy to do the same, for, where the world saw death and desolation, he saw the possibility of saving souls. Even more, he encouraged the priests, telling them that service in a time of epidemic is *the stuff of martyrs*, that this was *a desirable time – now, when without the cruelty of the tyrant, without the rack, without fire, without beasts and in the complete absence of harsh tortures which are usually the most frightful to human weakness, we can obtain the crown of martyrdom.*

During the plague that struck **Marseille in 1720**, Msgr. de Belsunce dedicated himself, personally, along with the resources of the Church, to the assistance of the sick. His words mirrored St. Charles' attitude: *God forbid that I abandon the people of whom I am obliged to be a father. I owe to them my care and my life, since I am their Pastor.*

Closer to our times, the influenza pandemic of 1918-1919, also known as the “**Spanish Flu**,” is considered one of the worst pandemics in history – an estimated 50 million deaths worldwide were attributed to it, far more than the total casualties of World War I. One of its victims, Jacinta of Fatima, offered her sufferings for the conversion of souls.

In the United States, deaths from the Spanish flu have been estimated around 675,000. In every State, all places of public gathering were closed against the spread of the disease, churches included. The ban was obeyed, although many argued that keeping the churches open would help to appease the panic and fear in which epidemic thrives.

In any case, everywhere the Church remained at the forefront of the medical and spiritual battle against the disease. Thus, when the Board of Health of Philadelphia ordered the closing of all schools and suspended church services until further notice, Archbishop Dennis Dougherty offered the use of archdiocesan buildings as temporary hospitals and enlisted all priests, non-cloistered nuns and the lay members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul to aid the victims of the flu.

[4]

LEARNING FROM HISTORY

As we have seen, Holy Mother Church and her children have witnessed, throughout the centuries, many plagues, as well as their accompanying hysteria and upheavals. The response, however, has always been the same – to remain at the side and at the service of those who suffer.

As in the past, the present pandemic is also for us, as Catholics, *a schooling and testing* – a testing of our faith and hope, a schooling in charity.

We must never waver in our conviction that God is in charge, that He loves us and that if we try to return that love, all things will work for our good. No matter the concrete circumstances in which we find ourselves, it is essential that we nourish, strengthen and protect this faith with the Sacraments (when possible), prayer, penance, the rosary, spiritual reading and all of the Catholic practices that Holy Mother Church has given us.

Panic and anxiety only give rise to selfishness and despair, leading us either to abandon our neighbor or to think that God has abandoned us. Nothing will plant and nourish the seeds of fear so much as con-

stantly taking in and dwelling on the latest news and statistics. We must also steer clear of conspiracy theories, which do not offer any concrete solution to the problem at hand and only feed a sense of dependency or, as has so often happened in the past, prompt us to reckless actions against some imagined enemy.

Supernatural charity has guided Catholics in times of plague not to turn in selfishly on themselves, but to look to Our Lord and see, by the eyes of Faith, that same Lord in their suffering neighbors.

The Black Death gives us an example of charity and sacrificial service with the innumerable clerics, religious and laymen who gave to the sick whatever help they could. On the material level, they nursed, cleaned and fed them and did what they could to alleviate their needs. On the spiritual level, they prayed for and with them, gave spiritual comfort, kept them company as they lay dying, and in the end, buried them – all the while, knowing that they themselves might be among the next to follow them to the grave...

But we must not forget that there is no true charity without true prudence. It is prudence that protects us from recklessness and presumption, which are as sinful as selfishness and despair. And it is prudence that teaches us that to practice true charity, we must seek first to preserve ourselves and others from harm.

The example of Catholics in the Black Death again provides a concrete example. As the illness was attributed to a presumable “corruption of the air,” they took whatever precautions were advised by the medical science of the age to “purify” the air – covering their mouth and nose with cloths drenched in vinegar, burning sweet-smelling herbs, carrying and smelling pomanders with similar herbs.

We know today how this particular disease spreads. Therefore, in a spirit of charity towards ourselves and our neighbors, and of justice towards the constituted authorities, we must submit to the civil regulations and medical advice intended to preserve ourselves of contagion and to avoid spreading it.

In these difficult times, we must never lose sight of that fact that this world is not our home. Holy Mother Church has always sought to lead souls to *seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.*⁶ In times of crisis, we must remember that all the trials and tribulations we face here have been permitted by our loving Father in heaven in order to earn our own place there for all eternity: *For that which is at present momentary and light of our tribulation worketh for us above measure, exceedingly an eternal weight of Glory.*⁷

⁶ Colossians 3:1-3.

⁷ 2 Corinthians 4:17.