

VIRUS, ART AND FAITH: HOW TO RESPOND TO COVID-19 (CORONAVIRUS DISEASE 2019)

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1. Virus

We are experiencing profound changes which, at times, make us feel disoriented. Pope Francis has long remembered – one need only think of a speech he made in Florence on 10 November 2015 – that “today we are not living an epoch of change so much as an epochal change. The situations that we are living in today therefore pose new challenges which, at times, are also difficult for us to understand. Our time requires us to live problems as challenges and not as obstacles: the Lord is active and at work in the world” [1].

The expression “epochal change” is not a slogan, but rather expresses a category of particular significance which indicates the profound and irreversible transformation of our present society and of our experience, a crucial theme that has yet to be explored in detail and which crosses the same “evangelical” path of Christianity in the contemporary world, assigning it a true historical diakonia.

Even five hundred years ago, while the Renaissance was flourishing, the Ferrara friar Savonarola thundered and, with his populist demands, prophesied misfortunes angrily preaching a theocratic model that avoided “earthly vanities”: this was how he comforted a disoriented humanity. Consequently, it can be noted that whereas there were initially non-practising believers who then became practising believers, they were later not only joined by practising non-believers, but also by those who neither believed nor practised any faith. The secular antidote to populism could be a supportive form of empathy, considering, as in the case of Covid-19, on the one hand, those who want to ignore the virus by launching messages using force and on the other, those who have caringly and actively participated in anti-contagion issues with dedication and self-sacrifice. The virus, the enemy of direct and indirect contact and, therefore, of sharing things, has hit the sharing economy hard, putting a stop to a race that seemed irreversible. What we need today is a completely different kind of sharing because, despite the con-

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tinuing pandemic, people are seeing each other again. People communicate because they look into each other's eyes, not just to exchange information: by staring and looking you are accepting to be stared and looked at. Communication is offering ourselves to each other: our personal identity is a starting point, but without alterity it goes unheeded. If alterity is not recognised, it is not only the other person who dies, but also the person themselves.

The important thing, however, is that for this recognition to be complete, it must be open to recognising the other's freedom. Pope Francis in Florence continued by saying: "I also advise that you have, in a special way, the capacity to dialogue and encounter. Dialogue is not negotiating. Negotiation is trying to obtain one's 'slice' of the common pie. This is not what I mean. It is seeking the common good for all. Discussing together, I would dare say getting angry together, thinking about better solutions for all. Many times, the encounter involves conflict. Dialogue is always given to conflict: thus, it is logical and predictable. We must neither fear it nor ignore it but accept it. 'It is the willingness to face conflict head on, to resolve it and to make it a link in the chain of a new process'".

2. Art

The question arises: during this pandemic can art and, in particular painting, rightly represent an open window on the visible and the invisible?

Over the centuries, art has become an introspective tool for exploring man's soul and body, but it has also represented a means for questioning nature, thought of as an affective territory, a surface on which to project worries, anxieties and absolute questions, on the threshold between reason and tragedy.

There are different moments on this temporal voyage and equally different artistic movements, conceptions and expressions that narrate the personal events of the artists themselves. They are, nevertheless, also affected by the events of the time, the works themselves communicating their meaning. As a means of information, documentation and distribution of images they consequently determine the most diverse reactions and responses [2-5]. It is however true that, during the current drama and persistence of the pandemic situation, there has been a natural difficulty in representing in pictures what is happening, i.e. facts and sensations linked to the suffering, compassion, strong emotions, sentiments: this is not dictated by the artists' indifference or reticence, but by the need not to indulge in pain, much less exalt it.

This is what the art historian and critic Vincenzo Trione highlights in an article [6] in which he reports on data taken from Instagram regarding several important contemporary artists. There is on their part a choral response whose testimony in this period of lockdown manifests itself in silence, in an inability to visually represent what is irrefutably and painfully happening after the outbreak and spread of the virus which continues to involve and distress the entire world.

A different response comes from some of today's leading street artists. One such example is the British Banksy, a major exponent of the art, who has produced some pandemic-inspired artwork to express different aspects of the current coronavirus situation. His works often have a satirical background and in general concern topics such as culture and politics as well as contemporary social problems: from the prevailing excess of electronic devices to the negative effects of mass tourism on cultural and environmental heritage, from the denouncing of marginalization and poverty to the

equally dominant phenomena of globalization and standardisation. Trione points out that Banksy “uses playful but, at the same time, perturbing images full of references to Pop Art, graffiti and cartoons to address highly topical themes”.

There are responses from other artists as well, similar to Banksy’s but expressed as poetic and political choices. Jenny Holzer, a neo-conceptual American artist, is one such example, with her videos in which there are messages such as “we want to live”, that are much more expressive than a poetic manifesto.

There are, however, a limited number of artists who express their work in various ways to refer to the pandemic and its direct protagonists (doctors, nurses, health workers), with press reports, photographs, videos and commentary describing the event, highlighting a vision of hope, with footage of landscapes and beaches that reveal glimpses of light, clarity and serenity amidst the pain, despair and torment.

Besides Trione’s extensive description of the artistic testimonies relating to the virus, of which a brief summary has been reported, it is equally true that, during this period of solitude which has been imposed on everyone as a fundamental remedy to the hidden dangers of the virus, there is also free unlimited space for reconsideration and reflection, therefore for detachment as well as moments of intimacy or of great impact, motifs that prove to be quite creative.

Among the various depictions, it is worth mentioning the work of TVBoy, the pseudonym of Salvatore Benintende, an exponent of the NeoPop movement and, in particular, one of his best-known pieces “*L’amore ai tempi del Covid-19*”. The work was inspired by the famous painting “*The kiss*” by Francesco Hayez (considered first and foremost a classic artist, as well as a romantic one), in which two lovers exchange effusions wearing a mask and holding a bottle of hand sanitizer.

But there are also those who share in the pain and tragedy of those who have lost their loved ones without even being able to say goodbye to them, underlining the dedication and heroic nature of the health workers who have tirelessly followed and cured the infected.

In this sense, the artwork by the cartoonist Gianluca Costantini is significant. His drawings depict the profound affliction of the families of the sick, as well as rows of coffins and exhausted doctors: scenes which aim to “create pictures that are able to create memories”.

In this brief overview of responses to the pandemic situation and the consequent repercussions involving not only human but also psychological aspects of behavioural instability, uncertainty and fear, there are also messages of positivity that refer to inspiration, beauty, creativity. There are, in this regard, various projects and plans, but there is also a revisitation of famous masterpieces that symbolically give rise to a strong impact and an engaging message directed toward “flattening the curve of contagion”.

This is for example the campaign on the coronavirus emergency launched by the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine [7]. It uses several works of art, including Michelangelo’s “*The Creation of Adam*”, from the Sistine Chapel, in which the two hands exchange a bottle of disinfectant and “*The Last Supper*” by Leonardo da Vinci with Jesus sitting alone and wearing a mask. In our opinion, this is both questionable and objectionable from several points of view. However, to fully examine the responses resulting from the states, conditions and situations caused by this unknown and invisible and, at the same time, lethal virus, we would like to aseptically present some rich and varied records, which reflect – as was said at the beginning – impulses, sensations, palpitations, mental spaces, pain and drama, not with the detachment that art sometimes expresses, but with the involvement and closeness that are typical of art in the widest sense of the word.

Until now we have focused on the message that artists have conveyed to the world during the spread of Covid-19, but we should also think about how the world has engaged with art in the same period, where personal and social liberties have been restricted and have even become physical barriers that we have to deal with. The reasonable question is obviously a much debated one: “Can the virtual world effectively be a useful tool to help us draw closer to the real one or perhaps even replace it?” Unfortunately, the virtual and the real worlds are neither two-way nor complementary, especially when it comes to art. The former is based on a short rapid experience in which interactivity and timing are anachronistic compared to the personal and introspective face-to-face experience of the latter. But the fact is that during the pandemic situation a great deal has been and continues to be invested to develop virtual technologies, often integrating them into social media and presenting innovative functionalities, especially in terms of digitalization for multisensory enjoyment [8]. In a recent interview, the art historian, Philippe Daverio, stated that the right *modus operandi* to visit a museum was to contemplate a single art work at a time and to return to the museum to contemplate a different art work each time. Seen from this perspective, it is easy to see that dematerialisation and digitisation technologies can never replace the emotions conveyed by art works in their physicality, but they can certainly be a valid support at a time when physical places are out of bounds because they may be places of contagion.

3. Faith

A question naturally arises when talking and hoping for a “return to normality”: “Is the “normality” that we are necessarily leaving behind – because nothing will be the same as before – really what we have to hope for or is it actually one of the causes behind the problems we are experiencing?” It doesn’t necessarily mean we are automatically going to emerge from this difficult time stronger and better; what is certain, however, in a context strongly marked by an individualist anthropology and ethics, is that the future of the pandemic will be choosing how to be: if we are only looking for personal prosperity, then there will be an even more unequal and impoverished world or, if we are capable of considering the good of all people – believers and non-believers alike – then this will be acting with humanity and a sense of responsibility, in order to care for, accompany and help those who are more fragile, through those works of mercy inspired by the message of the Gospel.

At the crossroads before us, between “I” and “we” – given that the “difficult times” we have experienced have highlighted on the one hand, the fragility of the human being, and on the other, how deeply united and interconnected we are – choices need to be redirected to courageously develop and implement programmes that can lay the foundations for the sustainability of our planet, the growth and sharing of knowledge, and social and generational equity.

We have realised we need to treasure the value of “networking” and “teamworking” even more by exchanging different skills and competences and integrating them effectively. It is no coincidence that three Italian university rectors, in an interview entitled “The challenge of innovation in post-crisis universities”, stressed that it is precisely the dynamics of strong interdisciplinarity that is “fundamental in finding a solution to such a complex issue as the current pandemic. [...]. The wealth represented by the range of multidisciplinary skills available is of crucial importance in the difficult times ahead. A change of mentality is needed” [9].

It can be argued that an experience of faith may be able to provide a “breath of fresh air” in all this and help to look ahead with realism and well-founded hope. Hence, it is possible to set out on a new path. With the drama of the pandemic, however, a problem which was becoming increasingly more evident even before Covid-19, has resurfaced: “How can you build a new social reality in such a way as to guarantee everyone the possibility of living their historical existence to the full?” If thinking of eliminating the disease is a true utopia, turning back the hands of history means acknowledging the greatest defeat of contemporary man. This is the great challenge for the post-coronavirus era” [10].

As a resource, faith can therefore offer a new perspective in a world where social planning has proved inadequate. In addressing this new historical question, Christianity, which is not only a simple religious or social message, is itself a “historical reality” and can lay the foundations on which to build a post-pandemic society to foster a truly epochal change.

4. Faith, knowledge and research

“Fides quarens intellectum et affectum”, wrote Anselmo d’Aosta in his *Orationes*. From an existence that is open to faith comes the need to develop research in all its forms and at all levels, starting from scientific research, understood as a service for the protection and development of “construction”: knowledge needs a community that is open to totality and not simply to specialization. This is what is experienced at University, in particular, thanks to the fact that, despite the many specialisations, you are part of a “whole” (*uni-versitas*) and you work inside the “wholeness” of one cause, with its various dimensions and common responsibility to use it correctly. Discovering “this great logos”, this breadth of reason is “the essential task of the University”. In this sense, “Christian thinking”, as the theologian A. Bozzolo affirms, “if it is such, cannot withdraw into itself, on the contrary, it is radically ‘responsorial’: the stricter it is, the less it seeks to impose itself on its own ‘object’” [11].

Hence, faith upsets the idea of academic or cultural institutions understood as anarchic citadels of specializations in which the formal equivalence of all admitted knowledge translates into self-referentiality and unquestionable subjectivism. We all know there is a difference between specialisation and fragmentation: specialisation is necessary for the development of knowledge and human growth and is unavoidable due to man’s very own limitations; fragmentation, on the contrary, is harmful, its negative effects are evident and cannot be ignored, because even if an increasingly abundant and redundant multiplicity of data and knowledge is given, it never achieves a unitary vision, so the meaning of knowledge and what is real is eventually lost, including the very meaning of existence itself.

“Making science” and “making culture” in this perspective of faith, besides revealing their “informative”, as well as “formative” and “performative” dimension which, in no way diminishes the value of the different forms of knowledge, on the contrary, support and establish specific and irreplaceable contributions, providing an authentic relational and cross-disciplinary context.

It is not surprising that Pope Francis in the important Proem of the Apostolic Constitution, “*Veritatis gaudium* (The joy of truth)”, wished to suggest, even in choosing the title, the possibility of rediscovering the relationship with truth in the form of an “encounter” which is a source of joy and fraternity.

All this starts from the initial statement in which “the joy of truth [...] expresses the restlessness of the human heart until it encounters and dwells within God’s Light and shares that Light with all people. For truth is not an abstract idea, but is Jesus himself, the Word of God in whom is the Life that is the Light of man”. Everyone has been invited – and this is important now during the pandemic but will be even more so, hopefully soon, when the pandemic ends – to design “outstanding interdisciplinary centres and initiatives aimed at accompanying the development of advanced technologies, the best use of human resources and programmes of integration”, to set up “specialized centers capable of deeper dialogue with the different scientific fields” and practice “shared and converging research between specialists of different disciplines”, to study “the epochal issues affecting humanity today and to offer appropriate and realistic paths for their resolution”. Within these “cultural laboratories”[...]“scholars from different religions and from different scientific fields can interact with responsible freedom and mutual transparency, thus entering into ‘dialogue among themselves for the sake of protecting nature, defending the poor, and building networks of respect and fraternity” [12].

5. Conclusions

We would like to conclude with an excerpt from the editorial of issue N.20 of the Journal “Conservation Science in Cultural Heritage”, which refers to “Culture unites”.

“Culture unites” may be intended as a collective call in times of need: in truth, it refers to a project whose aims and objectives are the protection and enhancement of the immense and prestigious heritage of historical-artistic, as well as architectural-monumental, archaeological, archival-library, musical interest in Italy and other countries.

It is a voice that calls for a commitment to the value of culture, as a tool that allows informed, reasoned and reasonable choices to be made, but are also constructive choices for the future of the new generations who are experiencing this “pandemic emergency”, which is also an “educational emergency”. That means thinking of education not only in terms of teaching (tuition), but also learning (training), acquiring experience and improving skills through practice and everyday life, in view of a human flourishing of the person as an individual and as the living cell of a community.

Five years after its publication, “Laudato si” continues to provoke us, especially in the light of everything that has happened, when in no.215 it invites us not to neglect the relationship between adequate aesthetic education and the maintenance of a healthy environment. “If someone has not learned to stop and admire something beautiful, we should not be surprised if he or she treats everything as an object to be used and abused without scruple. If we want to bring about deep change, we need to realize that certain mindsets really do influence our behaviour. Our efforts at education will be inadequate and ineffectual unless we strive to promote a new way of thinking about human beings, life, society and our relationship with nature” [13].

It is affirmed in this special year dedicated to “Laudato si”, and immediately after the publication of the Encyclical Letter “Fratelli tutti” (Assisi, 3 October 2020) on fraternity and social friendship.

A “great brotherhood” seems to be today the most suitable solution to the drama of the loneliness of man – consumer and spectator – closed within his individualism and passivity; it saves time in politics, mediation, meetings, building civil society and care.

The tragedy of the pandemic has increased the awareness of being a world community in which the evil of one, is to the detriment of all. No one saves themselves alone: we can only save ourselves together [14].

Faith, art and culture either accompany each other and “converse with each other”, or they are inexorably impoverished: this is why we read in “Fratelli tutti”, “A country flourishes when constructive dialogue occurs between its many rich cultural components: popular culture, university culture, youth culture, artistic culture, technological culture, economic culture, family culture and media culture”.

An engaging proposal which is, nevertheless, a plausible response, as well as guidance for this period in time, characterised by unprecedented challenges and profound changes.

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Biographical notes

Salvatore Lorusso is a former full Professor of the University of Bologna. He is a Foreign Member of the Russian Academy of Natural Sciences; Emeritus Professor of the Cultural Heritage Institute of Zhejiang University, China; former Visiting Professor of the Academy of Social Science of Zhejiang University, China; Visiting Professor of the Faculty of Arts, Lomonosov Moscow State University, Russia; former Vice-president and now, a Councilor of the Società Italiana per il Progresso delle Scienze (SIPS-established in 1839) and Direttore Generale of the Accademia della Cultura Enogastronomica. His biography appears in the 2016 Marquis Edition of Who's Who in the World. He is the founder and director of two book series relating to specific issues pertaining to the sector of cultural and environmental heritage. He is the author of over 430 publications in national and international journals and of 22 volumes and monographs covering commodity science, cultural heritage and environment. In 1997, he founded the Diagnostic Laboratory for Cultural Heritage at the Ravenna Campus of the University of Bologna and remained head of the Laboratory for eighteen years. In 2001, he founded, and is Editor-in-Chief of the historical-technical Journal "Conservation Science in Cultural Heritage". His scientific work deals mainly with the study of the "system-artifact-environment-biota" and diagnostic, analytical, technical and economic evaluation within the context of the protection and valorization of cultural and environmental heritage.

Mauro Mantovani, born in Moncalieri (Turin - Italy), in 1966, is a Salesian Priest and currently Rector of the Pontifical Salesian University (UPS), Rome, where he is Professor in Theoretical Philosophy. He is a Doctor in Philosophy at the Pontifical University of Salamanca (Spain, 2006), and a Doctor in Theology at the Pontifical University "San Tommaso d'Aquino" Angelicum, Rome (Italy, 2010) and teaches Philosophical Theology, Philosophy of History and Philosophical Propaedeutic, while his most recent studies and publications focus on the history of Thomism and on the fine line between Philosophy, Theology and Science. Since November 2016 he has been President of the Conference of Rectors of the Pontifical Roman Universities and Institutions (CRUIPRO).

Lucio Colizzi, graduated in Computer Engineering from the University of Salento, Italy. He has worked in the private sector for the company Infobyte Spa in the field of design and development of virtual reality applications. In 2001 he became Director of the Computer Engineering Division of CETMA (European Research Centre for Technology, Design and Materials) where he was the scientific coordinator of several major industrial research projects. He is currently the CEO of the innovative startup Smart-EducationLab, a CETMA spin-off company operating in the fields of digital manufacturing, IoT and process digitisation and simulation.

He is the author of a European patent in the field of mechatronics and several scientific publications. His areas of expertise focus on the development of ICT technologies in industry 4.0, cultural heritage and healthcare IT. He teaches digital supply chain at the "Istituto Tecnico Superiore della Logistica Puglia". He is currently doing his Phd at the Department of Computer Science of the University of Bari, Italy.

Summary

"We are not living an epoch of change so much as an epochal change", to quote Pope Francis. And in this new world full of new challenges, difficult to understand, the pandemic has prevented us from having direct and indirect contact, from sharing, from alterity.

And in art, a well-known introspective tool for exploring the soul and the body, what are the responses and reactions in considering the present dramatic and lasting pandemic moment? And can faith offer a new perspective in a world where the main social projects have proved inadequate? That is to say the same faith from which the need to develop research, in all its forms and levels, starting with scientific research, as a service and as a way to invest in “construction”.