

VIRUS, ART AND FAITH: HOW TO RESPOND TO THE CHALLENGES POSED BY COVID-19

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1. From virus to post-virus

It is now five years since the drama of the Covid-19 pandemic was tackled on a planetary level. If the alarm concerning that particular virus, and perhaps its immediate variants, seems to have subsided, and little is said about it even today, the danger remains – at times almost like a portent – of only finding oneself in a “period of transition” between one pandemic that has been dealt with and another that is imminent and perhaps even more lethal.

What have we learnt from those moments in which our situation of intrinsic precariousness and vulnerability emerged so clearly, despite the providential developments in science and technology, and the undisputed advances in applications that utilize the latest research and discoveries? Apart from expressing a few “*mea culpa*”, what lessons and guidance have come to us and enabled us to learn from what we have experienced? There has been no lack of various contributions in this regard, also from the viewpoint of philosophical reflection [1].

“We have realized that we are on the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented, but at the same time important and needed, all of us called to row together, each of us in need of comforting the other. On this boat... are all of us”: so said Pope Francis in the unforgettable extraordinary moment of prayer “in solitude” in St. Peter's Square, Rome, on 27 March 2020, in the “midst” of the pandemic [2]; being profoundly “interconnected”, it is only natural that we must take care of our common home and neighbours, near and far, present and future, including the generations to come, in a more critical way.

Indeed, today “we are not living an epoch of change so much as an epochal change”, and “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”: this is what Pope Francis said ten years ago in Florence, in November 2015, adding that however, “the Lord is active and at work in our world,” at all times [3].

A double observation, shared in “unsuspected times” with respect to the pandemic of a few years ago, but which nevertheless shows, on the one hand, its validity also with respect to the new historical-cultural, anthropological and ethical, social and geopolitical scenarios emerging today, and on the other hand, exhibits a “spiritual”, religious and intellectual awareness at the same time, present at least in the hermeneutics of history inspired by the Christian tradition: even the profound and irreversible transformation of

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today's society and our experience, albeit with all its dramas and the need to remedy what is directly dependent on our "wrongdoings", is nevertheless not extraneous to the action of Providence. Indeed, today, Christianity – in profound and open dialogue with other cultural and religious traditions, and with their sapiential "treasures" – is responsible for historical and cultural *diakonia* (ministry, charitable work) which is at the service of the contemporary world.

Five hundred years ago, while the Renaissance was flourishing, the Ferrara friar, Savonarola, thundered, and with his populist claims also prophesied misfortunes, angrily preaching a theocratic model that avoided "earthly vanities": this was how he comforted a disoriented humanity. Consequently, 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 practiced 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 wanted to ignore the virus by forcefully launching messages, and on the other, those who caringly and actively participated in anti-contagion issues with dedication and self-sacrifice. But we also realised how important communication is and the goal it is oriented towards, starting with how we talk about science and the results of its discoveries.

The virus, the enemy of direct and indirect contact and, therefore, of sharing things, 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 after that lockdown, people are re-connecting. People look into each other's eyes, not just to exchange information, but to communicate: by staring and looking you are accepting to be stared and looked at. Communication is offering ourselves to each other: our identity is a starting point, but without alterity it goes unheeded. If alterity is not acknowledged it is not only the other person who dies, but also the person themselves. The important thing, however, is that to fully achieve this acknowledgment, the person must be open to acknowledging the other's freedom.

Again in Florence, Pope Francis stated: "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

Once the pandemic was over, one asked oneself *could art and, in particular, painting have represented and can they continue to 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 too are 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 [4-7].

It is however true that, during the drama of the pandemic, there was a natural difficulty in representing in pictures what was happening, i.e. facts and sensations linked to suffering, compassion, strong emotions, sentiments, which was 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 pointed out in an article [8] in which he reported on data taken from Instagram regarding several important contemporary artists. On their part, there was a choral response whose testimony during the period of lockdown manifested itself in silence, in an inability to visually represent what was irrefutably and painfully happening after the outbreak and spread of the virus which involved the entire world.

A different response came from some of today's street artists; among them it is worth mentioning Banksy, a British artist, considered one of the leading exponents of the art, whose work is often satirical and in general concerns 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 standardization. Trione pointed 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 were responses from other artists as well, similar to Banksy's but expressed as poetic and political choices. Jenny Holzer, a neo-conceptual American artist, was one such example, with her videos in which there were messages such as "*we want to live*", that were much more expressive than a poetic manifesto.

There were, however, a limited number of artists who expressed 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 revealed 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 the period of solitude imposed on everyone as a fundamental remedy to the hidden dangers of the virus, there was also free unlimited space for reconsideration and reflection, therefore for detachment as well as moments of intimacy or of great impact, motifs that proved 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 were also those who shared in the pain and tragedy of those who had lost loved ones without even being able to say goodbye to them, underlining the dedication and heroic nature of the health workers who tirelessly followed and cured the infected.

In this sense, the cartoonist Gianluca Costantini produced some significant artwork. His drawings depicted the profound affliction of the families of the sick, as well as rows of coffins and exhausted doctors: scenes which aimed 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 were also messages of positivity that referred to inspiration, beauty, creativity. There were, in this regard, various projects and plans, but there was also the revisitation of famous masterpieces that symbolically gave rise to a

strong impact and an engaging message directed toward "flattening the curve of contagion". One example was the campaign for the coronavirus emergency relating to 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, they can be considered 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, 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 conveyed to the world during the spread of Covid-19, but we should also think about how the world engaged with art in the same period, when personal and social liberties were restricted and also became physical barriers that had to be faced.

A reasonable question and obviously a much debated one is: "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 world and the real world 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 today a great deal is being invested in developing virtual technologies, especially in terms of multisensory enjoyment [9]. In a recent interview, the art historian, Philippe Daverio, claimed that the right *modus operandi* to visit a museum was to contemplate a different art work each time one went. Seen from this perspective, it is easy to see that dematerialisation and digitisation technologies could 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, after having experienced a certain "return to normality": "Is the 'normality' that we have necessarily left 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?" First of all, it doesn't necessarily mean we have emerged stronger from that difficult time; what is certain, however, in a context strongly marked by an individualist anthropology and ethics, is that *the future of the pandemic, or pandemics, will be what we ourselves are able to make of it*: if we are only looking for personal prosperity, then the world will be even more unequal and impoverished 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 between "I" and "we" that is ahead – given that the "difficult times" we 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 towards courageously developing and implementing programmes that can lay the foundations for the sustainability of our planet, the growth and sharing of knowledge, and social and generational equity, the effective promotion of justice and peace – as the

regrettable continuation of conflicts in an increasing number of areas throughout the world demonstrates, almost as if we were facing a "third world war fought piecemeal".

We have realised that 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 the 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" [10].

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 with well-founded hope. It is always possible to set out on a new path. With the drama of the pandemic, however, – L. Leuzzi wrote – one problem that 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 disease is a true utopia, turning back the hands of history means acknowledging the greatest defeat of contemporary man. This is the great challenge of the post-coronavirus era" [11].

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 St. Anselm of 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 "whole" of one cause, with its various dimensions and common responsibility, so it is used correctly. Finding "this great *logos*", this breadth of reason – it was Pope Benedict XVI who emphasised this, calling for a "broadening of the horizons of rationality" – 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'" [12].

Hence, faith also challenges the idea of academic or cultural institutions understood as anarchic citadels of specialization 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, which is necessary for the development of knowledge, 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 it provides an increasingly abundant and redundant multiplicity of data and knowledge, 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, thus reveal their "informative", as well as "formative" and "performative" dimension without diminishing the value of the different forms of knowledge, but on the contrary, support and establish the specific and irreplaceable contributions they provide in a truly 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 – which was important during the pandemic but is even more so in this post-pandemic period – 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 equip themselves with "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" will be able to "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'" [13].

On 9 December 2024, at the Vatican, meeting with the participants of the International Congress on the Future of Theology organised by the Dicastery for Culture and Education, Pope Francis reminded them of the urgent task, which involved everyone, of 'rethinking thought', and in this regard stated that "The first thing to do, in rethinking how to think, is to move beyond simplification. Reality is complex; challenges are varied; history is full of beauty and at the same time marred by evil. When someone cannot or does not want to deal with its dramatic complexity, then he or she easily tends to simplify. Simplification, however, mutilates reality; it gives rise to empty and unilateral thinking and it generates polarization and fragmentation. That, for example, is precisely what ideologies do. Ideology is a simplification that kills: it kills reality, it kills thought, it kills community. Ideologies flatten reality to a single, shallow idea, which – like parrots – they then repeat obsessively and manipulate" [14].

It is very interesting that in the perspective of the "fermentation of knowledge", history, which is in itself already a realisable "*locus*" of interdisciplinarity and crossdisciplinarity, also finds space. "This involves letting theological reflection 'ferment' in combination with other disciplines: philosophy, literature, the arts, mathematics, physics, history, law, politics and economics. These disciplines ought to ferment, because, like the senses of the body, each has its own specific function, yet they need each other".

Along these lines, on the occasion of the Seminar promoted by the Pontifical Academy of Theology on 13 September 2025, Pope Leo XIV stated: "A significant witness to the knowledge of faith at the service of humanity, in all its dimensions – personal, social and political – is the *Social Doctrine of the Church*, which today is also called upon to provide wise answers to digital challenges. Theology must be directly involved because an exclusively ethical approach to the complex world of artificial intelligence is not enough. Instead, we need to refer to an anthropological vision that underpins ethical action and, therefore, return to the age-old question: What is a human being? What is his or her inherent dignity, which is irreconcilable with a digital android?" [15].

5. Conclusions

We are deeply convinced that "culture unites".

"Culture unites" is, first of all, 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 which are also constructive choices for the future of the new generations who today are faced with 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.

Ten years after its publication, *Laudato si'* continues to provoke us, when, in no. 215, especially in the light of everything that has happened, 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" [16].

It is also pointed out in 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 – who is closed within his individualism and passivity; it saves time in politics, mediation, meetings, building civil society and caring.

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 [17].

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, "between virus and post-virus", is characterised by unprecedented challenges and profound changes and the need to recover from the centrality of the person.

"This is a time in which everything seems to count more than the human being: money, objects, images, power, algorithms, prestige, ego, appearances, markets (commercial and financial), geopolitics, wars, etc. [...]. And just as people seem to lose attention of person, the Person in his innocent power and fragility paradoxically becomes the central point of focus to restore dignity to human life. Indeed, without the centrality and the primacy of the person in their unshakeable uniqueness, humanity disappears, there remains a shadow that we chase continuously without realizing it is only a dark projection of what we clearly are in reality: people in flesh and blood, mind, psyche and spirit" [18].

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Summary

Five years after the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, the alarm it caused seems to have subsided. There is little talk of it, and yet the foreboding of a new, even more deadly catastrophe remains. One wonders whether we have learnt anything from those moments that highlighted our precariousness and vulnerability despite the developments made in science and technology, and whether we have made good use of our experience. At the end of the pandemic, the question arose as to whether art, and painting in particular, continued to represent an open window on the visible and the invisible, just as the question in the field of faith arose as to whether "normality was what we should hope for, or whether it was actually normality that was the cause of the problems we are currently experiencing". Our experience of faith can provide us with "new breath", a new perspective on the world, and help us to look ahead with realism and well-founded hope.