

Coronavirus: One Single Humanity, One Common Vulnerability

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Looking inward and looking at what is essential

The coronavirus has caught humanity off-guard. Pressing issues before the pandemic had little to do with an epidemiological crisis of global proportions. Although it had been discussed as a theoretical possibility in scientific warnings and depicted in movies, its dystopian character and, to a certain extent, eschatological nature caused us to respond too slowly. It is likely that the arrogance of the West led them to believe: "Something like this will never happen to us; serious diseases and parasitic infections (malaria, dengue fever, Chagas disease, Ebola...) always happen in developing countries". Goliath showed the same self-reliant attitude when fighting against the much younger David. The entire world, that thought it was controlling the course of history, has found itself conquered by an

invisible, minuscule virus, in the face of which the arms race has proved itself to be powerless.

Death, so far from the daily experience of the self-proclaimed first world, has instead become an event that affects us closely; it has entered into the awareness of many people who ask themselves: "What will happen if I get sick?, or, how will my body react?".

Suddenly, the virus has made us look inward, because our decreased social contact (even with the infinite number of electronic means at our fingertips), allows us more time with ourselves and points us towards what is essential, since consumerism has suddenly collapsed. We are now focused on survival, and we have realised what the essential elements of our life are: health, relationships, love, our daily food... We have discovered that the idols we previously worshipped and venerated, at concerts or on foot-

ball fields, cannot save us. Now we exalt health professionals because we are entrusting our lives to them.

Saved “in the nick of time”

Globally, I believe we have saved humanity “in the nick of time”. Not in the sense of assuring the continuation of the species, but rather because, in spite of the initial indecisiveness of some countries, we have finally decided to put the elderly and most vulnerable at the centre of our concerns. Boris Johnson may have been able to coldly consider the death of 400,000 British people as something more preferable than stopping the economy, but any society that would have chosen this option would not have come out the other end with anything resembling human... life. No society could raise their heads after living through the trauma of allowing so many people to die.

Even so, the suffering has been immense: that of the doctors who are seeing so many people die before their very eyes and having to face the possibility of prioritising some ahead of others in moments when the health system cannot sustain them all; the suffering of those who care for the elderly, who are mainly women, and who are carrying out their work in very precarious circumstances; that of the ill who die on their own in hospitals, in spite of the good will of those “strange beings” who due to their protective clothing seem to be from another planet; that of the families who are experiencing the pain of separation; the suffering of elderly people who deeply fear becoming infected and falling victim to the disease; that of the workers in essential services, who fear infecting their loved ones; that of a large sector of the population, who

are having difficulty managing their anxiety; and finally, the great suffering of so many millions of people who have lost their income and only means of survival.

How difficult it will be to overcome such suffering since the moment when we will be able to say, “we have overcome the virus” seems so far off! There will be no “end” until a vaccine has been found. How difficult it is to heal the wound of the death of a loved one who we could not say goodbye to and who we could not mourn at a funeral!

In the meantime, in the coming months, we should find ways to make sure that this sense of solidarity that has emerged as we face this common problem together does not disappear, because we must not forget that the huge economic crisis (both national as well as global), is not going to affect us all equally. Our society will only be a truly democratic and fair one if all of us, gradually and united as one—and according to the economic status of each individual—take on the enormous health costs generated over these last few months, and somehow “rescue” those who have lost their entire income.

All things considered, in order to achieve this, it will be necessary for political parties to raise their game: they will need to seek above all the common good, and not capitalise upon the general feeling of discontent resulting from the loss of people’s buying power. Perhaps now is the time for Europe to take the struggle against tax havens seriously, which exist even within the European Union. Ultimately, political parties urgently need to form a common long-term strategy in order to overcome the crisis; otherwise, they will be responsible for their own slide in public opinion, and the ensuing risk to the country’s democracy.

Shifting of the global hub towards the East

It is not a foregone conclusion that humanity will reach the level of awareness it needs to after this pandemic. In fact, we know that we are usually very forgetful and that difficult resolutions that are made in a crisis are often cast aside when the crisis is over.

But what we are seeing is a shifting of the global hub towards the East. If the United States falls into an economic hole, while China managed to contain the pandemic with relative speed, we could be witnessing the beginning of the sorpasso by China as the main global player. Add to this the success of the pandemic response in South Korea, Singapore or Vietnam, and the hub of the world could be relocated into this geographical area. Paradoxically, if there was talk of a possible Chernobyl effect in China at the start of the pandemic, it now seems that this has been reinforced. The reduced protection of individual's privacy in these countries could tempt certain sectors currently based in the West. In the face of global competition, they could ask that the privacy and civil rights of people here be sacrificed in order to compete with these developing countries efficiently.

In order to avoid the dilemma "security (and money) or freedom", we should look to the successful examples of countries like Germany or Portugal, who did not allow power to be centred on one single person and who did not sacrifice the privacy of individuals either. China, nevertheless, has shown itself to be a partner that cannot be trusted due to their lack of credible statistics in relation to the number of infected and deceased. In other words, the opacity of their system raises

huge suspicions, which is why it seems very likely that the West will reconsider a certain "repatriation" of production, or at least of strategic goods. This is why, paradoxically, a rethinking of the globalisation of production will be accompanied by greater digital communication, and a new form of competition in global industry will begin, in which the sectors of leisure, culture and education will be profoundly affected.

Unavoidable commitments

The first thing we need to do is to re-establish trust amongst ourselves. We shall see to what extent, after the pandemic has completely finished, we continue to see others as potential threats to our health. The lack of trust brought about by social distancing could become embedded in our culture.

Countries of the European Union should be capable of working in solidarity with those countries most affected by the crisis if they don't want to run the risk of irreversibly breaking up the Union altogether. Each country needs to have its own internal debates on the advantages and disadvantages of belonging to the European Union. Populism has emerged in all countries, particularly since the humiliation suffered by various countries in the South that received assistance from Union members in the last crisis, so repeating the same policies could be fatal to the Union, particularly when no one is responsible for the spread of the pandemic and when cuts to health budgets were made so that we could be "deserving" of that assistance. The global economic crisis will create humanitarian emergencies of immeasurable magnitude. Spain and Italy will need an economic rescue,

probably in a more dignified manner and not as hurtful as during the previous crisis, but who will be able to help the Latin American and African countries?

We urgently need to develop a global narrative on the causes of what happened:

a) It is necessary to highlight the ecological causes: the human being, on gaining ground in nature, increasingly led to contact with animals that carried new viruses against which we have no protection. This is well-known to happen not only in the Far East, but also in the North Pole with global warming, or in the Amazonian region, where deforestation will expose us to an infinite number of new viruses and bacteria.

b) We need to rethink our model of globalisation and consumerism: we are not only consuming goods in a way that cannot be universalised, but we should also focus on purchasing more goods locally. Not only are we consuming excessively, but we are also purchasing products that originate from further and further away. These are apparently much cheaper because we are not paying a fair price for the goods, and nor are we impacted by the ecological costs of the transport.

c) We need to implement an action plan to deal with other potential pandemics and catastrophes. Above all, strengthening the quality of the public health system and the research of key issues.

d) We urgently need to evaluate our system of care for the elderly: the number of deceased in nursing homes is so high in Spain that we need to ask questions about the quality of service to make sure that reductions in cost are not for the benefit of certain investment funds that have commodified old age. In any

case, it would be hypocritical for society to blame them without first asking themselves how much society values the elderly. After all, it is society that “outsourced” its care of the elderly. Many people dedicated to this care serve with heroic patience those people that we cannot –or do not want to– care for. They have also been on the frontline at risk of contagion, since caring for the physical health of the elderly requires constant proximity and contact.

Conclusion

A species like the human race, which occupies the whole planet, exploits it to its limit and is so interconnected is vulnerable to pandemics, but faced with the coronavirus, there is hope: it may allow us to feel like one united humanity through the experience of our shared vulnerability. In Christian terms, every ill may contain some good: the fact that this pandemic has not just affected countries in the South has forced us to react with urgency in the face of a problem that is affecting all countries, races, and religions. Many times, in order for someone else to have more, others are forced to have less; in order to be the first, someone else must be second. However, faced with a global virus, we ourselves will only win the battle if everyone wins. Although having been affected in many different ways, this is the first disease our generation has faced at a universal level. There are not many opportunities to face a common challenge in which we save ourselves only by saving everyone.

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