

END-OF-YEAR REFLECTION

After the Pandemic: An Opportunity for Brother and Sisterhood

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We are starting 2021 with our gaze fixed on the end of the pandemic. It seems that now the question is not when it will all be over, but rather how it will happen and what will life be like after this very intense period. The imminent arrival of the vaccine – at least for the so-called “northern countries” – leads us to believe that we will be able to return to the same routine as before the pandemic started. Nevertheless, along the way, the virus of poverty continues wreaking damage. Will we have learned anything during the time that we have been confined? Let us take advantage of this moment in order to stop and review all that we have lived through. We can do it by going back over those slogans that have accompanied us for all these months. When an expression becomes popular it is because it contains within itself something essential of the spirit of our time. Finding in it the deep significance ought to help us to rearm ourselves interiorly so as to be able to live the year 2021 with greater serenity, clarity and commitment.

Are we fighting against the virus?

Ever since the beginning of the pandemic and the confinement, at the same time that inclusive language and equality were pushed aside, there began to appear uniformed men on our television screens to inform us of the up-to-the-minute struggle against COVID-19. The political discussions about the virus were tinged with war-like language which called to the citizens as “soldiers”, referred to the health care professionals as “an army that never quits fighting”, to the virus as “the enemy to be conquered” and to “everyone” without reflection, in a hegemonic way and without nuances or exceptions. “War”, “battle”, “front”. An aggressive and bellicose image took hold of both the public and private narrative. The media and the population in general, fearful and intoxicated, agreed to it without criticism.

But the language of war is not a strategy meant to deal with a pandemic. Let us remember that from ancient times medical science has confronted infectious diseases not only

with hospitals and doctors, but above all by proposing improvements in city planning, the sewers and the housing, guaranteeing access to drinkable water, improving the feeding of children. But never by deploying armies.

For that reason, faced with the message of fear and bellicose speeches as the way of confronting crises, we would like to propose that from now on we use a language that revolves around life, attention, presence and accompaniment, tenderness, comfort and resiliency. A language that instead of calling us to “combat”, asks us to build alternatives from the perspective of community and care.

Will everything turn out well?

This has been one of the main expressions of relief in the last few months. We have seen it on many posters and often we have said it to friends when we have seen them overcome by a problem with a difficult solution. We often do not know how things are going to turn out, but it is absolutely necessary to keep yourself standing up, not throwing in the towel too early. Just like that soccer team that has to make two goals in the second half in order to win the game. Not only do we need for everything to “turn out well”, but we have to “believe that everything will turn out well.”

We have to abandon the uncritical optimism and the false security of a sustainable technological, social, political and economic system that is individualistic and profoundly unjust. We have to recognize with all humility that “not everything will turn out well.”

Let’s recall with pain how this pandemic has treated more cruelly the residences for elderly persons, the thousands of loved ones who have died, all of the violence that has remained masked behind the informational collapse of COVID-19, the educational catastrophe that has taken place on a global level, and the millions of persons – near and far – who have

remained in the shadow of poverty for many years and even indefinitely. Everything will turn out well only if we are capable of bearing all of these realities, carrying grief, accompanying the victims and learning to live with the certainty that, even in the darkest nights, the reality is sustained and inhabited by the Mystery of the presence of God. Etty Hillesum, Simone Weil, and a cloud of witnesses have shown that to us throughout history.

Will I resist?

During many weeks we went out on to the balconies of the cities and towns in order to applaud the health workers and all those people who could not quarantine themselves because their work was considered to be an essential service. Perhaps we also applauded ourselves a little bit in order to animate us in the middle of this unprecedented and restricted situation that put us face to face in the mirror with our fragility. And very soon the song “I Will Resist” of the Duo Dinamico wafted from some window and also from the humming of some man or woman in the neighborhood. Perhaps, just as we did with the applause, we sang in order to convince ourselves, but without any certainty, or commitment or discernment. Resistance to what or whom? To the virus?

To the restrictions of the “new normal”? To the system? To loneliness and isolation?

There are many questions that we ought to ask ourselves, but it is hard for us to formulate them because the answers would require from us conversion, responsibility, action, loss of privileges and raising our voices. True resistance is that which not only is exercised against an opposing force, but that which generates reflection and transformation. It is a resistance that subverts fear and the temptation to do nothing. It is a resistance that is done collectively and in solidarity. As Donna Haraway explains in her book *The World*

that We Need, it is a resistance that is urgent, “faced with the threat of depression and defeat, of cynicism, of strange fascist futurists.” It is finally a resistance done in order “to invent that which is not yet, but that ought to be”, going beyond simple denunciation and furious criticism.

Stay at home?

The hashtags #IAMStayingAtHome or #StayAtHome were to be found everywhere for weeks. Based on the epidemiological criteria, the call to go outdoors the least possible, to telework and reduce one’s social activity has become a call to individual responsibility and an example of solidarity. A mature society is that which is capable of making some sacrifices in the short term that in the long term seek to achieve the greater common good. By following the recommendations of the public health authorities, we doubtless contributed to containing the transmission of the virus and of protecting the health of the community. But it is not possible always to stay at home. What should you do if you do not have a home? Or all those people who live in precarious situations, in apartments that are like a small boat? Or with the threat of being dispossessed? Or the women who have had to be confined to a house living together with their abusers?

The imperative to stay at home reinforces one of the most dangerous elements in our societies. For the last several decades, there has been coming together an ideal of life that promotes the home as a type of bunker that isolates us from a threatening outside world that is filled with dangers. Wrapped in the maximum comfort and the maximum protection, “We have not lost anything outside!” This is the dystopian dream of any authoritarian system: a multitude of persons closed up in their houses, weakly connected from a technolog-

ical point of view, afraid to go down to the street, without any interest in participating in the public forum, totally withdrawn from the common good.

The strategy of social distancing should not be normalized, but rather should be seen as a profound anomaly. As quickly as possible, let us recover the streets, that risky, marvelous place of encounter and celebration, that magnificent place where we can reclaim democracy and rights, that place which is so necessary to weave together every day the struggles shared as a community, a neighborhood and as dwellers in the same city. At the same time, we cannot forget the conditions of so many persons who will continue to live without a roof over their heads or in housing which is insecure and unhealthful and for whom the street does not represent a desire for freedom in comparison with those who have a home to which to return.

Shall we take care of ourselves?

“Take care of yourself” has become popularized as an expression from the time of the affirmation of the proposition that we cannot have an authentic transformation of our society nor of our ways of life if one does not put caring for one another at the center. Finally, we have awakened from the dream of omnipotence and invulnerability, and we have given ourselves permission to embrace our own fragility, recognizing ourselves as interdependent and recognizing the necessary work of those that care for us.

But individualism grabs us by our skin like a tick, and the “let’s take care of ourselves” at the beginning has the tendency of narrowing more and more the “ourselves” into just the “myself”, a simple mechanism of self-protection, one more form of egotism. Well, the slogan “let’s take care of ourselves” only has meaning if it aspires to make the

“ourselves” ever broader and more inclusive until it comes to embrace all of humanity and, very especially, those people who do not have anyone to care for them.

So, beginning with that small seed of revolution hidden in the phrase, the imperative mood of the verb becomes a political imperative because it questions not only to what I dedicate my time, but also the use that I make of my money (yes, also of the taxes that I pay), my private property and which political options I defend. From an individual/familial desire, the “let’s take care of ourselves” then is converted into a way of understanding life, into a way of giving life.

The new normal?

In the midst of the exceptional time of confinement, outsize plans were developed for a return to a “new normal”. To speak about “normalcy” suggests a return to a stable situation, predictable, free of uncertainty. At the same time, to have to modify it with an adjective like “new” alerts us to the fact that nothing can go back to the way it was before.

Yes, in effect, the pandemic is not just the product of biological randomness, but also a direct consequence of predatory human life on the planet. The new normal cannot mean just some small adjustments. It ought to imply a bet on a radically sustainable model from both a social and ecological point of view. If there is not a rethinking in depth, calling “normalcy” an approximation which is irresponsible toward nature and a perpetuator of obscene inequality among human beings is to consecrate once again as inevitable an unsustainable and inhuman situation.

A return to the situation as it was before the pandemic is a desire to which only a privileged minority of humanity aspires, as if the global order prior to the pandemic were a just, harmonious and equitable order. We will not

have learned anything if we go back to the normalcy of before. In order to give birth to an authentic new reality, we have to live more consciously, more aware of recognizing those persons who suffer injustice and who have been made invisible and vulnerable. This kind of attentive “Samaritan” look moves us and leads to compassionate and committed action to alleviate the suffering and thus to deal with the causes.

And what now? The road to the post-pandemic

And now that we have begun the road to the post-pandemic, with our backpack covered with repurposed slogans and a deeper understanding of life, we can ask ourselves several important questions. Will this crisis serve as an apprenticeship for future crises coming out of the climate emergency? Will the vaccine arrive to the most impoverished areas of our planet with just criteria for distributing it? Will we finally examine our public health systems now that we recognize that they are underfunded so that good health can be a universal and guaranteed right? Will the economic policies be maintained that have helped the most disadvantaged through the pandemic? Will Life, in capital letters, be at the center of future individual and collective decisions?

We are not resigned to the post-pandemic’s taking dystopic roads. It should be clear to us that without an interruption to the old normal, there cannot be a new normal with the aroma of fraternity and of promises kept. Human beings should rival each other in speeding up its coming. This applies in particular to those of us who share the dream of Jesus of Nazareth. In a definite way, on us depends making the road of the post-pandemic a road of brother and sisterhood.

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