

Second Conference, April 2nd 2020

Faith Hope and Love in a time of crisis.

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and enkindle in them the fire of your love.

Send forth your Spirit, and they shall be created. And you shall renew the face of the earth.

Let us pray, o God who by the light of the Holy Spirit instructs the hearts of your faithful, grant us, in the same Holy Spirit to be truly wise and always to rejoice in his consolation through Christ our Lord.

It is back to basics for us in our religious beliefs as disciples of Jesus. I open this conference with a familiar quotation from St. Paul's Letter to the Corinthians. It is more familiar from marriage ceremonies, but Its fuller significance can apply also at this moment, far though it be from weddings we are celebrating

Love never ends. If there are prophecies, they will become superfluous. If there are tongues, they will cease. If there is knowledge, it too will become superfluous. The reason is that we now know only in part and we prophesy only in part. Once perfection comes, everything partial will become superfluous. When I was a child, I spoke as a child; I reasoned as a child, I thought as a child. When I became an adult, I put aside the things of childhood. Now we see as in a mirror, confusedly, but then we shall see face-to-face. Now I know only partially, then I shall know fully, just as I will be fully known. Now faith hope and love abide, all three of them, but the greatest of them is love.

This pandemic clattered me into a state of unconsciousness about my religious beliefs. I first heard of coronavirus in late January or early February. Something I did not know about two months ago has knocked me out, in the sense of temporarily reducing my religious convictions to a vague and fuzzy consciousness.

I was properly unconscious nearly fifty years ago. I was taking a stroll after lunch in our garden in Marianella, and plonk, I collapsed on the

pathway. I was rushed to hospital, put into intensive care. The priest came and anointed me with the sacrament of the sick.

Prompted, rather surprisingly, by Saint John of the Cross I will try, in a fuzzy way, to recollect what coming out of that unconsciousness triggered in me.

Firstly, I was trying to understand what had happened. I had no actual memory of collapsing but, as I recovered, I began asking people to help me comprehend the episode. The initial human reaction to a crisis, my collapsing or this pandemic, is to try to understand how it happened.

Secondly, I began trying to remember what I was like before the collapse. Memory has a crucial role in all human life. Can we remember what life was like before Covid 19, and is there anything in my memory that I need to revise? Memories can be vague.

Thirdly, I began a reflective phase wondering what I really wanted to do with my life. I was sidelined for a few months and began to wonder: when I get back to some routine, what will be truly important to me? What will be my deepest desires?

This is an artificial reconstruction of a muddled phase of my life, though I consider that the stages of trying to understand, struggling to remember and attempting to prioritize my wants and desires is broadly accurate. I am not here to talk about myself. This is where Saint John of the Cross comes into the reckoning. He had the mystic's eye to explain how endeavoring to understand something can lead us to faith. When I examine my memory, John says it can lead to authentic hope. When I scrutinize my wants and desires, I begin to appreciate that love is all you need. It is not often I can get John of the Cross and the Beatles into the same paragraph.

Saint John of the Cross explains that, in the life of a disciple of Christ, one of the most difficult things is the sensation when we have lost our bearings on the way of life. That is always true, but it seems eerily accurate for what the pandemic is doing to us. We are merely trying to understand it. Yesterday I looked at the headlines in online edition of the Guardian newspaper – the Guardian is never short in offering opinions on just about everything. Some of the headings I came across were – *How long does coronavirus live on different surfaces? What countries have the most cases and deaths and why? There is one change that works – share your*

coronavirus story. Fake news in the time of coronavirus – this is the big threat.

Trying to rationally understand something is normal, but we should acknowledge the limits of all human understanding. I sympathize with Mao Tse Tung, He was reportedly asked sometime in the 1960's "Chairman Mao, what do you think is the long-term consequence of the French Revolution". The furrowed Chairman replied "The consequences of the French Revolution of 1789/90? Far too early to say".

I am not opposed to seeking a rational understanding of this pandemic, but keep in mind that not only is it too early to say: do we even understand what is going on? You have a view – I have a view. Who is to say which view is better? Even before the pandemic, there was something curious happening to the type of intelligence now favored in liberal societies. You use your intelligence in a functional way: you get educated so that you might get a well-paid job. Do not bring religion into the public square of intelligent debate. If people want to be religious, let them keep it to themselves and practice religion privately to their heart's content. Do not attempt to see the social consequences of genuine religious practice.

In this sort of climate, the church suffered a serious loss of nerve. Of course we, church people, had our own form of noisy certainties. We were not shy about shouting them at people. We do less of that now, thank heavens.

Even before this pandemic, the church was losing its bearings. The crisis of faith was already there. We continued to proclaim our doctrines and dogmas and say our creeds. What did those complicated ideas of consubstantial with the Father really mean? Can we ever understand God? Is God not too great a mystery to be cocooned (that word, again) within a formula of human ideas? Can we really expect other people to understand what puzzles ourselves?

Understandably, as a religious and priest, I do not want to banish God to the fringes of life. Neither do I want to reduce the mystery of God to stock phrases of ideas and words. God is quite simply a mystery in whose presence I wish to give thanks and praise.

I am proposing that there is a link between the human search for understanding and a reconfiguring of what faith means. Let us go back to the

first disciples. How often they do not even get the point “*Don’t you even understand*”, Jesus said. Recall the silly questions they put to Jesus. There is an occasional flash of insight as in the Gospel of John. *Then Jesus said to the twelve. Do you too want to go away? Simon Peter answered him: Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we believe and we know that you are the holy one of God* (6:67).

Human formulae of understanding surely help, but they are not an alternative for an adult faith. The loss of understanding, of a clear sense of what we know and how we know, is inevitable when we lose our bearings. For those who choose the Christian way, faith makes us free to face uncertainty and live with it. We need to appreciate our faith as a steady relationship with the God who has not abandoned us. Faith can never be shrunk to a set of propositions or cozy answers. Neither can faith be a proud affirmation of my own capacity to master truth. Faith is a confidence that I can be mastered by the truth, by Him who is the truth. I can be held in the love of God even when, humanly, I do not feel I can hold on.

We should be positive in offering a vision of faith as the possibility of nurturing a dependable relationship with the God who first loved us. Faith is never purely a clever system of words. Faith is nurturing a dependable relationship with God. If God is with me, questions will not disturb me.

The pandemic has thrown up questions and no answers. It is important to continue our struggle at understanding, but we should nourish an adult faith in the God who never abandons us. *Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.*

If understanding can open up a different consideration of faith, then our sense of memory can open up exciting vistas of Christian hope. Memory plays tricks with us. In a crisis, like the time I collapsed or during the pandemic, our memory of the past can be illusory. We have a tendency to remember what we want to remember. What was life like before the pandemic? The one definite thing is that we cannot go back to the securities of the past. Our memory is an effort to string together a continuity in our life. Very well, as far as it goes, but with Christian hope we can deepen that identity.

Hope is different to confidence in the future. I am confident that the pandemic will pass and a cure will be found. Hope strikes a different chord.

Hope assures me that the past, the present and the future are held together by the God who has not abandoned us. As church people, we need to have incredible patience, with ourselves first of all, and then with everyone else. A patient church is the garden in which proper hope grows.

Pope Benedict wrote an encyclical on hope. I quote the opening words.

In hope we are saved, says St. Paul to the Romans. According to the Christian faith, salvation is not simply a given. Salvation is offered to us in the sense that we have been given hope, trustworthy hope, by virtue of which we can face our present. The present, even if it is arduous, can be lived and accepted if it leads towards a goal, if we can be sure of this goal and if the goal is great enough to justify the effort of the journey. (Spe Salvi, 1)

My human memory gives me the confidence that the pandemic will pass and that scientists and researchers will find a cure. It has been done before, why not again? The trouble with human memory is that we can so easily forget. I was preoccupied about Brexit a few months ago. I am still worried about Brexit, but it is not the immediate priority. I need something stronger than human memory to keep me going. Put your hope in the Lord. Psalm 130 has the correct posture: “*I wait for the Lord, my soul waits. I hope in his word. My soul is intent on the Lord, more than the watchmen for daybreak*”

After understanding and remembering, what about what we want in life? Where are our deepest desires? In typical western cultures, we talk a lot about choice though, in these days of enforced isolation, a little less so. We are doing what we have been told because we accept that we are remaining isolated or cocooned for the sake of others. When this pandemic passes, as it will, where will our hearts settle about what it means to be free? Life is more than a supermarket-shelf set of choices. I will take that one – not that other one – it actually does not matter much. Freedom of choice brings us up against our deeper desires.

I accept that for these days we have little choice. When some sense of routine returns, it will be useful to remember these eerie days when we have little choice. It would be a lesson well if hardly learned if we give lesser weight to the consumer mentality that is part of us all. There is great good sense in asking questions about the direction of the desire at the root of our

human nature. There is bound to be a clash of consumer interests when some routine returns, and that will be a real test of how deep our desires go.

In the quotation I started with, Paul to the Corinthians, he makes it very clear that love considered crudely as doing good is not enough. Love takes delight in the other person, rejoices with them in good times and stays close to them in the more difficult days. God delights in us, warts and all. If we want to be like God, other people should be my delight, never a means to feeding my baser consumer desires.

We are in the maelstrom of staggering anxiety. We are right to use our human ingenuity of understanding, memory and desire to help us through this crisis. During this enforced time of isolation, we should be nourishing links to the prime virtues of faith, hope and love.

Why are you cast down my soul?

Why groan within me

Hope in God. I shall praise him again,

My savior and my God. (Psalm 42)

Remember, o most gracious Virgin Mary,

That never was it known that anyone who fled to your protection,

Implored your help. or sought your intercession was ever left unaided.

Inspired with this confidence, I fly unto you, o Virgin of Virgins, my Mother.

To you do I come, before you I stand, sinful and sorrowful,

O mother of the Word incarnate.

Despise not my petition but, in your mercy, hear and answer me.

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