

A white dove is shown in flight, positioned in the upper left quadrant of the image. The background is a textured, light-colored wall, possibly representing the interior of a tomb. At the bottom of the image, a yellowish-gold cloth is draped across the width, symbolizing the shroud. The overall lighting is warm and golden, creating a sense of hope and resurrection.

“HE IS RISEN ON THE THIRD DAY”

A BIBLICAL-SPIRITUAL READING
OF THE PANDEMIC EXPERIENCE

(ITALIAN) BISHOPS' COMMISSION FOR THE DOCTRINE
OF THE FAITH, ANNOUNCEMENT AND CATECHESIS

TIME OF LISTENING



“The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of all people today, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.” (*Gaudium et spes*, 1) That is what the Council taught us. And it is with this spirit, with openness of heart, that we want to allow ourselves to be interrogated about the consequences marking our country, and other countries, in the aftermath of the Coronavirus pandemic.

Addressing ideally both believers and non-believers, as Pastors we want to suggest a “spiritual and biblical reading” of this experience regarding all of us, first of all, as human beings.

These few words express the core of the faith of the believing community and the trust in a grace that was given to us and continues to expand in space and time. For us, human time and God’s eternity meet there, becoming the center of history, the basic criterion, the interpretive key for the whole reality.

It is time to listen together to the voice of the Spirit that Jesus handed over to us on the cross (cfr. Jn. 19:30) and in the Cenacle. (cfr. Jn. 20:22) The task of the Spirit is to make known the truth of what is happening. (Jn. 16:13) Therefore, we will try to approach our reality, allowing ourselves to be guided by the Spirit’s voice, treasuring, first of all, some of the pages of the Bible that recount the final hours of Jesus’ earthly experience. In those pages is an open space in which believers can encounter the Lord anew, while non-believers can feel their questions are accepted and protected.

THE TRAGEDY OF FRIDAY

“My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” (Mr. 27:46) In the gospel account, the cry coming from the heart of the Crucified Jesus remains, for the moment, unanswered.



We can imagine that Jesus’ family members or friends, those who had remained near or those who had strayed have made these words, “Our God, why have you abandoned us?” their own.

During these months of the pandemic, all of us have asked the sense of such an unpredictable and tragic experience. “Darkness came over the whole earth.” (Mt. 27:45) It is as if those three hours from noon to three in the afternoon on Friday now had expanded, encompassing our world with the darkness of suffering and death.

The pandemic revealed the world’s pain. It certainly produced some pain and will produce some in the future as well, with vast and persistent economic and social consequences. These are profound sufferings: such as the death of our loved ones, especially the elderly, without the closeness of family affection, the sense of helplessness of doctors and nurses, the loss of institutions, the doubts and faith crises, the reduction or loss of work, the limitation on our social relationships.

The pandemic has also abruptly awakened those who thought they could sleep securely in their beds of injustice and violence, hunger and poverty, wars and diseases: disasters caused in large part by an economic-financial system based on profit, which fails to integrate fraternity in social relationships and protecting creation. The Coronavirus has shaken superficiality and carefreeness and denounced another, no less serious pandemic often recalled by Pope Francis: that of indifference. The picture of the world with zones colored red indicating the spread of the virus, makes us think of the biblical image of the ground that is “red” due to its being soaked by the brother’s blood “crying out” to God. (cfr. Gn. 4:10)

All this is summed up in the shout of pain launched by the Crucified Jesus toward heaven, almost an accusation to God, a dramatic question of meaning posed in the face of death: why so much suffering in the world? It is an interrogative resonating in everyone's heart, believers and non-believers alike, and begs for a reaction.

However, on Calvary there are other people. Near the cross, there are some women, the beloved disciple, the centurion, Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea. Of course, they are few, but they represent the rest of humanity capable of "standing" under the cross (cfr. Jn. 19:25) to keep Jesus company, to accompany Him to His death, to guarantee Him a dignified burial. Thus, that Friday is revealed as a day not only of violence and death, but of compassion and sharing as well.

If we look at our present day in the light of this scene, we cannot fail to recognize that, first of all, the doctors, nurses, and healthcare workers have been "standing" under the cross of the infected people. Community ministers, pastoral ministers and volunteers, catechists and those working in Caritas, have alleviated material, psychological and spiritual poverty. Journalists have brought images and words of hope into homes, hospitals, homes for the elderly and detention centers. Law enforcement and many volunteers have served the communities with courage and dedication. The citizens have largely responded with a great sense of responsibility to the restrictive norms dictated by national and local institutions.

Even though, at times, problems have not been lacking, families have turned out to be places of new relationships, true and proper "domestic Churches" where prayer has flourished, as well as celebrations of the Easter season, reflection and works of charity. Even so, they rediscovered their "baptismal priesthood" and "spiritual worship" that do not always receive adequate space in the life of our parishes.

Christian denominations have come together for some times of prayer, deepening the traditional ecumenical ties. And some Muslim communities and those of other religions have expressed closeness and solidarity.

On closer inspection, the Good Friday of human history brings with it the abyss of pain, but also new gestures of faith and charity, touching their frailties and attentive to personal relationships. Never before have the calls of Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* sounded like a true pastoral program: “Realities are more important than ideas.” (n. 231) “I prefer a Church bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than an Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.” (n. 49) “The pace of this process must be steady and reassuring, reflecting our closeness and our compassionate gaze, which also heals, liberates and encourages growth in the Christian life.” (n. 169)

THE SILENCE OF SATURDAY

“He was buried.” (1Cor. 15:4) After death, Jesus allowed himself to be taken down from the cross, laid on the ground, wrapped in cloths, placed in a tomb darkened by a large stone. What the body of Jesus underwent is invaluable passivity, which reveals our same passivity: we come to the world because we are loved and welcomed by others, we are nourished and clothed by others and, in the end, we will no longer be masters of our own body, we will be handed over to others and to the earth. Whether we want it or not, we are “dependent,” we are limited.



The virus dealt a fatal blow to the delirium of omnipotence, to self-sustaining scientism, to the promethean tendency of contemporary people. It created a deep restlessness, almost a planetary trauma, especially in the rich and industrialized areas of the earth: a corresponding bewilderment regarding their sense of security, which easily became swaggar. Suddenly, this part of humanity also had to deal with their limitations, with their putting themselves in someone else's hands, with a huge stone at the entrance to the tomb.

And, as Pope Francis reminded, there is the realization that “we are in the same boat.” (March 27, 2020) There are no secure ships and broken rafts, but a single large ferry upon which a few thought they could reserve privileged compartments. Now, one could say, “we are in the same tomb.” We share fear and death, anxiety and poverty. We all, without distinction, are in a hurry to get out of the tomb. We would like to rise again immediately after Golgotha. But a temptation lurks in this haste: that of considering the pandemic a bad parenthesis, rather than a test for growth; a *chrónos* to make slide by as quickly as possible, rather than a *kairós* to seize upon and by which to let ourselves be taught.

The day after Jesus’ death is marked by silence. Not an empty silence, but one filled with expectation and sharing.

Jesus “learned obedience from the things he suffered.” (Heb. 5:8) Suffering, which, as such, should never be sought and procured, can become a school. The dramatic happenings of an event, which we did not choose, gave us the opportunity to enter in humbly in order to purify our gaze and our faith itself.

During these months, unfortunately, misleading theological interpretations of the origins of the pandemic have also been put forth again, presented as God’s punishment or scourge for the sins of people. They are interpretations that have the bitter taste of the words of Job’s friends, who, presuming to give a “logical” explanation, end up not feeling the pain of the one suffering and therefore, not thinking according to the God of the Bible.

In the silence of Saturday, another unseemly attitude has surfaced: the miracle temptation. Some gestures, that have little to do with the humble purity of the liturgy, rather reveal the difficulty of remaining in the tomb, sharing the questions and anxieties of each person in the face of death, and accepting to turn to God, omnipotent in love, with maturity and subdued tones.

The experience of this time has strongly put forth again another important aspect of Holy Saturday: to go without the Eucharist. A sincere attachment of many priests and the faithful to the Mass and communion has arisen. The close tie between the Eucharistic body and

the ecclesial body – from which the famous expression “The Eucharist makes the Church” comes – has been proven true once again, however, experienced in the form of absence. But the scene was unusual. On the one hand, the Eucharistic body was re-enacted on the altar by the priests, but on the other hand, the ecclesial body was forced to stay away from the altar, the table and communion. It was an unnatural separation, for however much the television broadcasts could partly fill in for it, supplemented by home celebrations. Nonetheless, an extended doing without the Eucharist belongs to the experience of dwelling in the tomb, awaiting the resurrection. From our sharing of the situation that many Christian communities around the world are forced to endure due to persecution or scarcity of priests, we can learn to more greatly appreciate the Eucharistic celebration and the mandate of charity given to us: Eucharistic communion is, in fact, aimed at ecclesial communion and service to our brothers and sisters. (cfr. 1Cor. 11:17-29)

It is by no means easy to courageously remain at peace in the tomb. It is, however, a necessary movement toward attentive listening to our brothers and sisters, toward a deep sharing of frailty, toward a recovery of prayerful silence, toward authentic reliance on the Lord.

THE HOPE OF SUNDAY

“He is risen ... and he appeared.” (1 Cor. 15:5) The announcement of the “third day” launched by St. Paul in the *kerygma* of the Letter to the Corinthians resonates in the



forms of hymns and narrations throughout the New Testament: the so-called “apparitions” are unique experiences capable of deeply renewing life. In fact, through his death, Jesus changed the direction of history. It is not His exclusive privilege. He is risen as the first fruits of those who have died” (1 Cor. 15:20), as the firstborn of the dead” (Rev. 1:5), first of all, because He opens the tomb of each of us.

Jesus rises only on the third day, when death had seemed to swallow him up forever, when the stone seemed to have entombed him definitively. Only on the third day, because the resurrection is true and credible when it embraces death and burial. The body of the risen Jesus is fully “transfigured”, because he had previously accepted to be completely “disfigured.” His glory shines because he passed through full solidarity with humanity. He accepted everything human, even its most horrible aspects.

The pandemic tested the proclamation of Christian hope, the “blessed hope” of which the liturgy speaks. Perhaps it also revealed the limitations of an overly abstract preaching on eternal life, hurriedly concerned when not simply silent, to refer to the beyond without spending the right time on Golgotha and in the tomb. In spite of the attempts to renew the proclamation of Christian hope, (cfr. Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*) we have remained anchored to a concept according to which immortality and the resurrection are “post” death topics, that is, regrading what we will be after death. In Western culture, topics like the end and beyond have largely been removed. Death, embarrassing and bothersome, has undergone two attempts at neutralization: with silence or, on the contrary, with turning it into a show. Eternal life, with all its implications – judgment, heaven, purgatory, hell, resurrection – is trivialized or relegated to the shelf of symbolic evocation: two attempts to exclude it from the earthly horizon, from human things worth aiming at.

For us Christians, yes, it is a question of terminology, but it is above all a question of experience and testimony. Certainly, the terminology needs to be updated, not just on a theological level, but also in pastoral practice and preaching. But, above all, it is necessary to know how to gather the signs of eternal life within our everyday earthly life. John’s Gospel often talks of eternal life and the resurrection in the present, for example with Jesus’ concise words to Martha. “I am the resurrection and the life.” (cfr. Jn. 11:25) Those who walk toward a desirable goal accept the difficulty of the journey without losing heart. Those who walk in the hope of eternal life find traces of eternity even in the gesture of giving a drink of water to a little one. (cfr. Mt. 10:42) Gospel in hand,

the final exam formulary will be very simple: “Did you help me when I was hungry or thirsty, when I was naked and poor, when I was a foreigner, sick and imprisoned.” (cfr. Mt. 25:31-46) “Ultimately, at the end of our lives we will be judged on love.” (St. John of the Cross)

The proclamation of Christian hope (Rm. 5:5) is far from an alternative to human hope: having it sometimes presented as a collection of abstract truth unrelated to our earthly existence and its expectations, has laid it open to the accusation of alienation, vain hope or compensatory fantasy. Christian eschatology is actually an anthropology claiming fullness, a charity that begins to take shape in the present and is oriented to its fulfillment. Without this horizon, every germ of love, each project, desire and dream would be mercilessly shattered: it would really be a deception of our life on earth, if a virus or an earthquake, a distraction in a car or a moment of desperation were enough for everything to end, forever.

Christian hope is based on the experience that the believing community has of the Risen One. Eight days after Jesus’ resurrection, the disciples are again in the Cenacle, in a house with closed doors. (cfr. Jn. 20:19) They have an anguished perception of the risk they run outside that environment, which they now feel as reassuring but in the long run they know is too cramped. The Risen Lord comes to them in that closed space where they have taken refuge. The encounter happens, first of all, on the first day after *Shabbat*, that is the first work day after the day of rest and celebration. The Risen Jesus comes to activate processes of evangelical life into the everyday time of the disciples.

It does not say how long He stayed with the disciples. It can be assumed that He was there for the time needed to reassure them, to catechize them on the mysteries of faith and to motivate them to a new way of life. If, on the one hand, the trauma of Jesus’ violent death had disoriented the disciples and made them lock themselves away, on the other hand, it had paradoxically solicited questions like those of Thomas – “If I do not see the signs of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the sign of the nail and do not put my hand into His side, I will not believe” (Jn. 20:25) – which now find a response in the Risen One.

The event of Jesus' resurrection puts our desire for life on a level of real possibility. His resurrection entails the definitive transfiguration of his body, the entrance of the flesh into the divine dimension. His earthly body was invested by the Spirit and glorified, anticipating the final resurrection of each of us. "Christ's resurrection is not an event of the past; it contains a vital power which has permeated this world. Where all seems to be dead, signs of the resurrection suddenly spring up. It is an irresistible force. Often it seems that God does not exist: all around us, we see persistent injustice, evil, indifference and cruelty. But it is also true that in the midst of darkness something new always springs to life and sooner or later produces fruit. On razed land life breaks through, stubbornly yet invincibly. However dark things are, goodness always re-emerges and spreads. Each day in our world beauty is born anew, it rises transformed through the storms of history. Values always tend to reappear under new guises, and human beings have arisen time after time from situations that seemed doomed. Such is the power of the resurrection, and all who evangelize are instruments of that power." (*Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 276)

FOR A CREATIVE JOURNEY

An Easter reading of the pandemic experience cannot advance the simple return to the previous situation, hoping to take up the plow again where we were forced to leave it. The experience of Friday and Saturday – the permanence on the cross and in the tomb – can no longer be experienced by Christians as a parenthesis to be closed as soon as possible. Rather it must become a *parenthesis*, that is an exhortation, an invitation to develop a different existence. The words of Pope Francis still resonate: “Pastoral ministry in a missionary key seeks to abandon the complacent attitude that says, ‘We have always done it this way.’ I invite everyone to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization in their respective communities.” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, n.33)

The cross and the tomb can become professors teaching us all to change, be converted, to listen with our ears and hearts to the tragedies caused by injustice and violence, to find the courage to put divine gestures into our human relationships: peace, equity, mildness and charity. These are the germs of resurrection, the flashes of the Sunday which make the proclamation of eternal life concrete and credible.

If we will learn that everything is gift, if a new personal and community style arises from this, which renounces complaining and arrogance and adopts sharing, thanksgiving and praise, then the pandemic will have taught us something important. We will have experienced it, read and elaborated it listening to the Spirit and sharing in the mystery of the Easter of Jesus, Crucified and Risen.

Then we will begin again as a Church community in the footsteps of the people of our time, animated by tenderness and understanding, by a hope that does not disappoint.

