



THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC AND PROMISES OF NEW LIFE

Very dear Sisters,

It gives me immense joy to be in touch with each one of you as we celebrate the solemnity of the most Holy Trinity, a powerful symbol of communion and communication. May the mystery of the Trinity be a model of our community living, characterized by gracious self-giving that implies sacrifices and evokes reciprocity.

Thank you very much for your reflections on my Pentecost message and the meditation on John 20. I appreciate these exchanges as they make circulation of life and insights possible.

In this circular I would like to share with you some of my reflections on the coronavirus pandemic and promises of new life.

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The Covid-19 pandemic has gripped the entire world in fear and uncertainty. As the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres described it once during an online interview, we have been going through “the biggest and most challenging crisis since World war II as the coronavirus pandemic is still holding much of the world firmly in its grip”. In the wake of this pandemic, we had lockdowns everywhere which destabilized millions of people, especially the daily wage earners and the migrants. It was a heart-breaking experience for me to see thousands of people, including families with small children and elderly, walking hundreds of miles without water and food to get back home during the nationwide lockdown in India. As Pope Francis reminded us, “the effects of lockdown on the masses – the daily wage workers, farmers, and migrants – is turning out to be disastrous. It brought poverty, harassment and insecurity to them.” Millions of people suffer from lockdowns as they became jobless overnight. It goes without saying that one has to appreciate the daring spirit of the poor people in the face of such adversity and poverty. The crisis has also stimulated people to be gracious and generous. The flood of stories of kindness and the way people are showing up for each other is a powerful witness to the best of humanity. As someone commented, “the world is full of nice people. If you can’t find one, BE ONE.” The light of human goodness shines through the darkness of the dread of the pandemic and its devastating effects. I take this opportunity to commend you, Sisters in our different provinces, for reaching out to the unreached and taking care of the poor and needy.

We had the visit of Covid-19 in the motherhouse and almost all of us contracted the virus, but we are very grateful to God for sparing us the nasty effects of this deadly virus. Personally, for

me it was a powerful experience of God's saving presence and of the affectionate care from sisters and family members. Some of our provinces are also touched by the virus in various ways with different effects. During the past two months, eleven of our beloved sisters joined the choirs of angels in heaven of whom five had contracted Covid-19 (confirmed): Sisters Carmen Bonelli, Carmen Arocena, Pilar Ruiz, and María del Carmen Bonmatí from the Province of Spain and Sr Charlotte from the Province of the United States. We remember all of them with much affection and gratitude for their dedicated life and committed service. During this pandemic, we have also lost family members, Assumption friends, colleagues and neighbours. May they rest in peace and in our hearts.

The pandemic has changed some key dynamics in the Church. It has never happened during our life-time that we have been asked to remain at home during the liturgies of Holy Week. In many of our communities, we have been in a liturgical lockdown for many weeks, and it still continues in some places. Some of us had theological questions regarding the meaning of this "virtual participation" in the Eucharist through Livestream liturgies celebrated in almost empty churches. In our mission field, too, we had to explore new ways of teaching, especially in places where online classes are impossible due to the lack of internet and other facilities for the staff and students. Moreover, all are facing financial challenges and our religious communities are no different. The long-term closure due to lockdown affected our communities which rely on the revenues from retreatants, boarders, seminars or sessions. We are forced to make some changes and adjustments in this regard and to experiment new things.

The lockdowns with fewer restrictions may continue for months as no one can predict the end of this crisis: when this disease will disappear or when the vaccine will be ready and available on a global scale. As countries open up again and people resume normal life, experts have warned of a second wave of coronavirus infections in the winter. Mike Ryan, one of the WHO emergencies experts, said during an online briefing: "this virus may become just another endemic virus in our communities." This would imply that we will have to learn to live with Covid-19 in the coming months. What is this current situation telling to each one of us? How are we preparing ourselves? What are some of the important lessons of this pandemic? What are our communities going to look like when this is all over?

PROMISES OF NEW LIFE

We all have been wondering what we will be like after this pandemic. I would like to share with you some of my reflections regarding COVID and its impact on our consecrated life in the post-pandemic period. My simple faith gives me the conviction that God is always doing something good for us, even if we are unable to understand it today. How did God intervene in your life through this pandemic? What good thing has God done in your personal life as well as in the life of your communities? What good have you done for yourself and for others?

This pandemic has been a totally new experience for all of us as none of us has lived through a time when much of our world has been brought to a standstill. We have triumphed after each crisis and have learned lessons from each crisis. This time won't be different. It is a time for introspection and some serious soul-searching. Someone commented, "the COVID-19 pandemic has plagued the world like a tsunami." Yes, COVID-19 respects no boundaries of class or creed. The virus is unconcerned about nationality, race, colour, ethnicity, status,

wealth, nobility, and religion. In general, it relentlessly attacks members of the human family. The virus treats all human beings alike and challenges some of our discriminatory attitudes and behaviours. I hope we will see the universe and the human family from a new perspective. I personally cannot believe how the entire world, that is more than seven billion people, changed within a few days and started to observe social distancing, to use face masks, and to get used to working from home, participating in online lectures, Zoom conferences, and virtual liturgies. I think many things will change in the post-COVID period, including our way of life: our sense of belonging, our liturgical celebrations, educational systems and policies, our social and pastoral ministries, the nature of international conferences, international travels, food habits, cultures, and traditions.

In every General Chapter, we express the desire to slow down and humanize our rhythm of life, but we have never managed to do so, until this invisible virus forced us to slow down a bit and find time for ourselves. We were all happy to get some personal time to process changes. As some Sisters shared with me, we have learnt to focus more on the essentials of life. The “God-alone” experience of Saint Marie Eugenie became more real. Living in lockdown provided us an opportunity to try and take a more careful look at what is happening inside of us. It was a moment to reclaim our spiritual space. It has instilled in us a longing for spiritual connectedness to God and social solidarity with the human family. It inspired us to appreciate the art of reading, to initiate creative ways of reinventing ourselves in our respective communities.

We had no choice and have been led, being more community-bound, to explore other ways of living out our religious calling. We have a renewed sense of belonging – we cannot be healthy without having everybody on board. The Covid-19 pandemic has challenged us to go beyond our individualistic mentality. We had to give up our personal privileges and freedom and to surrender ourselves to the decisions of the Governments for our own safety and that of others. It gave us an opportunity to become more aware of our collective fragility and interconnectedness. It invited us to make a shift from self-centredness to our social identity and belonging.

The lockdown periods characterized by social distancing and isolation led us to a virtual or online social closeness as we tried to stay connected more by social media and digital socializing. There seems to have a new consciousness of being together in distance. We can share space in the same Zoom conference hall, but we are separated and are miles apart. It is important to make a healthy distinction between loneliness and solitude in this context. While loneliness refers to an experience of being disconnected, irrespective of being surrounded by people or not, solitude is a choice that we make to be in touch with our true selves at a deeper level which generates growth, inner freedom, and maturity. Thus, we were not lonely, but in solitude to a certain extent.

Environmentalists say that the lockdown truly lessened air pollution and improved air quality. Does it inspire us to make a shift towards a more environmentally responsible lifestyle? Nature seems to have smiled at us and asked us to mend our ways that disturbs its ecosystem. In short, there is a call to choose a life-style that makes greater investment in social and ecological well-being.

As I wrote in the message of Pentecost 2020, I invite each sister, every community, province/region to take time and to create spaces for:

- rereading the pandemic experience in light of your foundational God-experience;
- discerning the new calls and new faces of your mission in this pandemic and post-pandemic period;
- preparing yourselves in response to the new calls of this coronavirus pandemic and its aftermath;
- exploring new forms of the RA Way or the RA Culture for today.

We need to ask ourselves: What sort of impact the pandemic will have on our consecrated life? How do we deal with the fear of the “uncertainty and unknown” which has taken a toll everywhere? How do we deal with our “constantly changing” plans? What sort of impact will the lockdown and its subsequent recession have on the running of our schools and our institutions as well as on our socio-pastoral ministries? What changes do we need to make in our plans for international and inter-continental travels and programs such as sessions, assemblies, gatherings, and celebrations?

It is a *kairos* moment for change. The pandemic experience taught us that rapid changes are possible and we can do things differently. It impels us to explore new ways and to make a difference in our lives and those of others – the people with whom we live and whom we serve in our respective apostolic fields.

We need to pray for the world in these difficult times. There is so much suffering by the perpetuated injustice as well as by the so-called natural calamities. The brutal murder of George Floyd by a police officer and the nationwide protests against racial injustice in the USA are fresh in our minds. Our prayers and thoughts also go to those affected by the flooding in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala as well as to those suffered much by the devastating cyclones in Bangladesh and in India. May all experience God’s healing and comforting presence.

When I started to write this circular, I did not think it was going to be this long. But these are some of the reflections that flooded my mind and challenged my heart as I lived this lockdown period in the Motherhouse.

You are always in my prayers and I know I am in yours as we journey together.

With all my affection and blessings!



Sister Rekha, r.a.,
Superior General

Auteuil, 7 June 2020