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Letter of the Holy Father to the priests of the diocese of Rome

The following is the letter sent by the Holy Father Francis to the priests of the diocese of Rome:

Letter of the Holy Father

Dear Brothers,

During this Easter season I had thought we could meet and celebrate the Chrism Mass together but, since a diocesan celebration was not possible, I am writing this letter to you. This new phase that we have embarked upon demands of us wisdom, farsightedness and shared commitment, so that all the efforts and sacrifices made thus far will not be in vain.

During this time of pandemic, many of you have shared with me by e-mail or telephone your experience of this unexpected and disconcerting situation. In this way, even though I was not able to leave home or encounter you directly, you let me know “first-hand” what you were going through. This in turn I have brought to my prayers, both of thanksgiving for your courageous and generous witness and of petition and trusting intercession before the Lord, who always takes us by the hand (cf. *Mt* 14:31). The need to maintain social distancing did not prevent us from strengthening our sense of fellowship, communion and mission; and this helped us ensure that charity, especially towards the most vulnerable individuals and communities, was not quarantined. In our frank conversations, I was able to see that necessary distancing was hardly synonymous with withdrawal or the self-absorption which anaesthetises, sedates and extinguishes our sense of mission.

Encouraged by these exchanges, I am writing to you because I want to keep close to you and accompany, support and confirm you along the way. Hope also depends on our efforts, and we have to help one another to keep it alive and active. I mean that contagious hope which is cultivated and reaffirmed in the encounter with others, and which, as a gift and a task, is given to us in order to create the new “normality” that we so greatly desire.

In writing to you, I think of the early apostolic community, which also experienced moments of confinement, isolation, fear and uncertainty. Fifty days passed amid immobility, isolation, yet the first proclamation would change their lives forever. For even as the doors of the place where they stayed were closed out of fear, the disciples were surprised by Jesus who “stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’”. After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, ‘Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you’. And with that he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (Jn 20:19-22). May we too let ourselves be surprised!

The doors of the house where the disciples met were locked for fear (Jn 20:19)

Today, as then, we sense that “the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, 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). How well we know this! We all listened to the numbers and percentages that daily bombarded us; with our own hands we touched the pain of our people. What we heard was not something alien to our own experience: the statistics had names, faces, stories of which we were a part. As a community of priests, we were no strangers to these situations; we did not look out at them from a window. Braving the tempest, you found ways to be present and accompany your communities; when you saw the wolf coming, you did not flee or abandon the flock (cf. Jn 10:12-13).

Suddenly we suffered the loss of family, neighbours, friends, parishioners, confessors, points of reference for our faith. We saw the saddened faces of those unable to be present and bid farewell to their loved ones in their final hours. We felt the suffering and powerlessness experienced by health care workers who, themselves exhausted, continued to work for days on end, out of a concern to meet so many needs. All of us felt the worry and fear experienced by those workers and volunteers who daily exposed themselves to risk in order to ensure that essential services were provided, and to accompany and care for the excluded and the vulnerable who were suffering even more from the effects of the pandemic. We witnessed the difficulties and discomforts of the lockdown: loneliness and isolation, especially among the elderly; anxiety, anguish and a sense of helplessness at the possibility of losing jobs and homes; violence and breakdown in relationships. The age-old fear of being infected once more reared its head. We shared the anguish and concern of entire families uncertain as to whether there would be food on the table in weeks to come.

We also experienced our own vulnerability and helplessness. Just as the kiln tests the potter’s vases, so were we put to the test (cf. *Sir* 27:5). Distraught, we felt all the more the precariousness of our own lives and our apostolic efforts. The unpredictability of the situation heightened the difficulty we feel in facing the unknown which we cannot control or direct and, like everyone else, we felt confused, fearful and defenceless. At the same time, we also experienced that healthy and necessary courage that refuses to yield in the face of injustice and reminds us that we were created for Life. Like Nicodemus, at night, confused by the fact that “the wind blows where it wills, and you can hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes”, we too wondered: “How can this be?” And Jesus tells us too: “Are you are a teacher of Israel, yet you do not understand these things?” (cf. Jn 3:8-10).

The complexity of the situation we had to face did not allow for textbook recipes or responses. It called for something much more than facile exhortations or edifying speeches incapable of touching hearts and confronting the concrete demands of life. The pain of our people was our pain, their uncertainties our own: our shared sense of frailty stripped us of any pseudo-spiritual complacency or any puritanical attempt to keep at a safe distance. No one can be unaffected by all that has happened. We can say that *we experienced as a community the time when the Lord wept*: for we too wept before the tomb of Lazarus his friend (cf. Jn 11:35), before the incomprehension of his people (Lk 13:14; 19:41), in the dark night of Gethsemane (cf. Mk 14:32-42; Lk 22:44). *It is also the time when his disciples weep* before the mystery of the cross and the evil which strikes so many innocent people. It is the bitter weeping of Peter after his denial (cf. Lk 22:62), and that of Mary Magdalene before the tomb (cf. Jn 20:11).

We know that, in situations like these, it is not easy to find the right way forward, and any number of voices will

make themselves heard telling us about all that could have been done in the face of this unknown reality. Our usual ways of relating, planning, celebrating, praying, meeting and even dealing with conflict were changed and challenged by an invisible presence that turned our everyday existence upside down. Nor did it simply affect individuals, families, specific social groups or countries. The nature of the virus caused our former ways of dividing and classifying reality to disappear. The pandemic knows no descriptors, no boundaries, and none of us can think of getting by alone. We are all affected and involved.

The notion of a “safe” society, carefree and poised for infinite consumption has been called into question, revealing its lack of cultural and spiritual immunity to conflict. A series of old and new questions and problems (in many places long since considered resolved) came to dominate the horizon and our attention. Those questions will not be answered simply by resuming various activities. They necessarily challenge us to develop a capacity for listening in a way attentive yet filled with hope, serene yet tenacious, persevering yet not fearful. This can prepare and open up the path that the Lord is now calling us to take (cf. *Mk* 1:2-3). We know that in the wake of tribulation and painful experiences we are never again the same. So all of us need to be vigilant and attentive. The Lord himself, in the hour of his own suffering, prayed for exactly this: “I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one” (*Jn* 17:15). Having experienced, as individuals and in our communities, our vulnerability, frailty and limitations, we now run the grave risk of withdrawing and “brooding” over the desolation caused by the pandemic, or else that of seeking refuge in a boundless optimism incapable of grasping the deeper meaning of what is happening all around us (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 226-228).

Times of tribulation challenge us to discern the temptations that threaten to mire us in bewilderment and confusion, in a mind-set that would prevent our communities from nurturing the new life that the Risen Lord wishes to give us. A variety of temptations can nowadays blind us and encourage sentiments and approaches that block hope from stimulating our creativity, our ingenuity and our ability to respond effectively. Rather than seeking to acknowledge frankly the gravity of the situation, we can attempt to respond merely with new and reassuring activities as we wait for everything to “return to normal”. But in this way we would ignore the deep wounds that have opened and the number of people who have fallen in the meantime. We can also sink into in a kind of numbing nostalgia for the recent past that leads us to keep repeating that “nothing will ever be the same again” and thus show ourselves incapable of inviting others to dream and to develop new paths and new styles of life.

Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, “Peace be with you. When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you!” (Jn 20:19-21)

The Lord did not choose the perfect situation to appear suddenly in the midst of his disciples. Certainly we would have preferred that what happened did not have to happen, but it did; and like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, we too can continue to speak sadly and in hushed tones along the way (cf. *Lk* 24:13-21). Yet by appearing in the Upper Room behind closed doors, amid the isolation, fear and insecurity experienced by the disciples, the Lord was able to surpass all expectations and to give a new meaning to history and human events. Any time is fitting for the message of peace; in no situation is God’s grace ever lacking. Jesus’ appearance in the midst of confinement and forced absence proclaims, for those disciples and for us today, a new day capable of challenging all paralysis and resignation, and harnessing every gift for the service of the community. By his presence, confinement became fruitful, giving life to the new apostolic community.

So let us say with confidence and without fear: “Where sin increased, grace has abounded all the more” (*Rom* 5:20). Let us be fearless amid the messy situations all around us, because that is where the Lord is, in our midst; God continues to perform his miracle of bringing forth good fruit (cf. *Jn* 15:5). Christian joy is born precisely of this certainty. In the midst of the contradictions and perplexities we must confront each day, the din of so many words and opinions, there is the quiet voice of the Risen Lord who keeps saying to us: “Peace be with you!”

It is comforting to read the Gospel and think of Jesus in the midst of his people, as he welcomes and embraces life and individuals just as they are. His actions embody Mary’s moving song of praise: “He has shown strength

with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly” (*Lk 1:51-52*). Jesus offers his own hands and his wounded side as a path to resurrection. He does not hide or conceal those wounds; instead, he invites Thomas to touch his pierced side and to see how those very wounds can be the source of Life in abundance (cf. *Jn 20:27-29*).

Over and over again, as a spiritual guide, I have been able to witness how “a person who sees things as they truly are and sympathizes with pain and sorrow is capable of touching life’s depths and finding authentic happiness. He or she is consoled, not by the world but by Jesus. Such persons are unafraid to share in the suffering of others; they do not flee from painful situations. They discover the meaning of life by coming to the aid of those who suffer, understanding their anguish and bringing relief. They sense that the other is flesh of our flesh, and are not afraid to draw near, even to touch their wounds. They feel compassion for others in such a way that all distance vanishes. In this way, they can embrace Saint Paul’s exhortation: ‘Weep with those who weep’ (*Rom 12:15*). Knowing how to mourn with others: that is holiness” (*Gaudete et Exsultate*, 76).

*“As the Father has sent me, so I send you” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them: “Receive the Holy Spirit” (*Jn 20:21-22*)*

Dear brothers, as a community of priests, we are called to proclaim and prophesy the future, like the sentinel announcing the dawn that brings a new day (cf. *Is 21:11*). That new day will either be completely new, or something much worse than what we have been used to. The Resurrection is not simply an event of past history to be remembered and celebrated; it is much more. It is the saving proclamation of a new age that resounds and already bursts onto the scene: “Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?” (*Is 43:19*); it is the future, the “advent” that the Lord even now is calling us to build. Faith grants us a realistic and creative imagination, one capable of abandoning the mentality of repetition, substitution and maintenance. An imagination that calls us to bring about a time ever new: the time of the Lord. Though an invisible, silent, expansive and viral presence has thrown us into crisis and turmoil, may we let this other discreet, respectful and non-invasive Presence summon us anew and teach us to face reality without fear. If an impalpable presence has been able to disrupt and upset the priorities and apparently overpowering global agendas that suffocate and devastate our communities and our sister earth, let us not be afraid to let the presence of the Risen Lord point out our path, open new horizons and grant us the courage to live to the full this unique moment of our history. A handful of fearful men were able to change the course of history by courageously proclaiming the God who is with us. Do not be afraid! “The powerful witness of the saints is revealed in their lives, shaped by the Beatitudes and the criterion of the final judgement” (*Gaudete et Exsultate*, 109).

Let us be surprised yet again by the Risen Lord. May he, whose pierced side is a sign of how harsh and unjust reality can be, encourage us not to turn aside from the harsh and difficult realities experienced by our brothers and sisters. May he teach us how to accompany, soothe and bind up the wounds of our people, not with fear but with the audacity and evangelical generosity of the multiplication of the loaves (*Mt 14:15-21*); with the courage, concern and responsibility of the Good Samaritan (cf. *Lk 10:33-35*); with the joy of the shepherd at his newfound sheep (*Lk 15:4-6*); with the reconciling embrace of a father who knows the meaning of forgiveness (cf. *Lk 15:20*); with the devotion, gentleness and tender love of Mary of Bethany (cf. *Jn 12:1-3*); with the meekness, patience and wisdom of the Lord’s missionary disciples (cf. *Mt 10:16-23*). May the wounded hands of the Risen Lord console us in our sorrows, revive our hope and impel us to seek the Kingdom of God by stepping out of our familiar surroundings. Let us also allow ourselves to be surprised by our good and faithful people, so often tried and torn, yet also visited by the Lord’s mercy. May our people teach us, their pastors, how to mould and temper our hearts with meekness and compassion, with the humility and magnanimity of a lively, supportive, patient and courageous perseverance, one that does not remain indifferent, but rejects and unmasks every form of scepticism and fatalism. How much we have to learn from the strength of God’s faithful people, who always find a way to help and accompany those who have fallen! The Resurrection is the proclamation that things can change. May the Paschal Mystery, which knows no bounds, lead us creatively to those places where hope and life are struggling, where suffering and pain are opening the door to corruption and speculation, where aggression and violence appear to be the only way out.

As priests, sons and members of a priestly people, it is up to us to take responsibility for the future and to plan for it as brothers. Let us place in the wounded hands of the Lord, as a holy offering, our own weakness, the

weakness of our people and that of all humanity. It is the Lord who transforms us, who treats us like bread, taking our life into his hands, blessing us, breaking and sharing us, and giving us to his people. And in all humility, let us allow ourselves to be anointed by Paul's words and let them spread like a fragrant balm throughout our City, thus awakening the seeds of hope that so many people quietly nurture in their hearts: "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies" (2 Cor 4:8-10). Let us share with Jesus in his passion, our passion, and experience, also with him, the power of the Resurrection: the certainty of God's love that affects us deeply and summons us to take to the streets in order to bring "glad tidings to the poor ... to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord" (cf. Lk 4:18-19), with a joy that all can share in their dignity as children of the living God.

All these things, which I have been thinking about and experiencing during this time of pandemic, I want to share fraternally with you, so that they can help us on our journey of praising the Lord and serving our brothers and sisters. I hope that they can prove useful to each of us, for "ever greater love and service".

May the Lord Jesus bless you and the Blessed Virgin watch over you. And please, do not forget to keep me in your prayers.

Fraternally,

FRANCIS

Rome, Saint John Lateran, 31 May 2020, the Solemnity of Pentecost.
