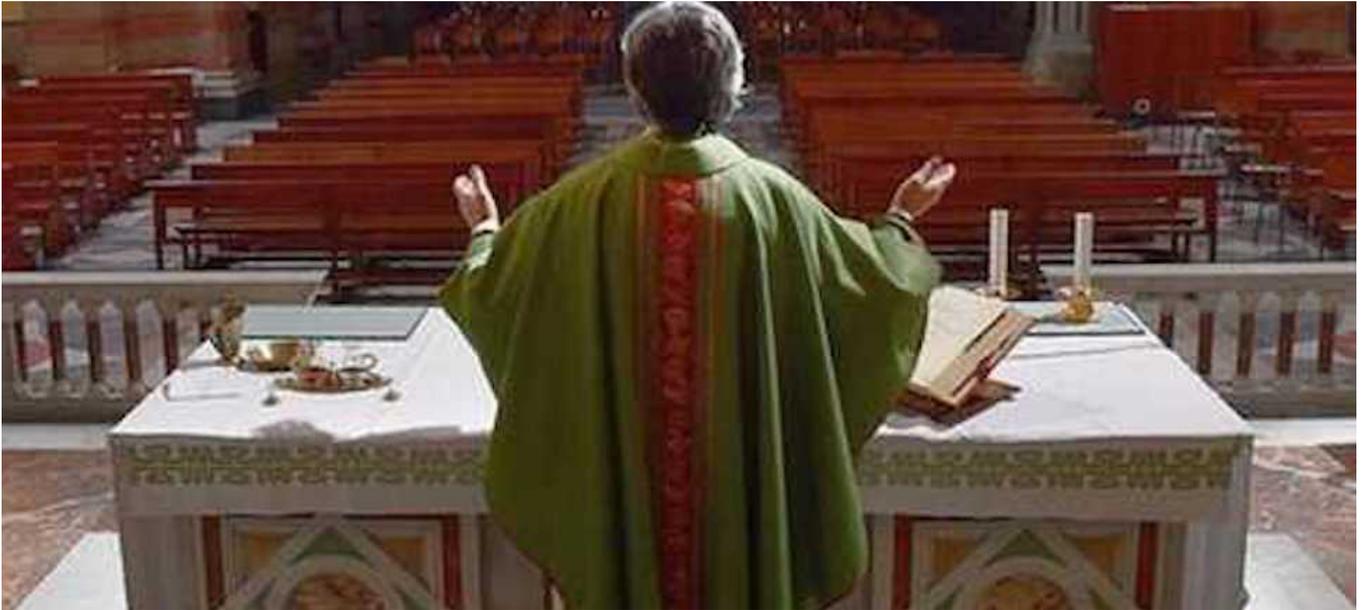


Faith in the Time of Covid-19: Ecclesial and pastoral reflection



“I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness” (*Isa 43:19*). This text from Isaiah seems to me the right key to start a conversation.^[1] I think it is vital, though not easy, to speak to each other and to people, employing the words of God so that our voices do not become lost in a chorus of broken exchanges. I am convinced that what is happening, despite how it appears to some people as the onset of ruin, is instead the beginning of a new exodus. Nothing will be the same as before!

During this time I have gone several times to visit the priests in the parishes; I haven't reached everyone yet, but I promise to complete the tour in the next few days. It has enriched my heart to find everyone always present, and so many in prayer in their deserted churches.

What is happening leads us to give more space to an aspect of our ministry that has always been present but which today perhaps we live with a renewed awareness, namely, praying and interceding for the people entrusted to us. Because of the conditions we find ourselves in, this especially appears to be the most precious ministry, the first and fundamental one, from which every other ministry draws strength.

Circumstances urge us to return to our rightful role, preferring before all else prayer and the proclamation of the Good News (cf. *Acts 6:4*).

People are pleased to find us in the place that most naturally associates us with our ministry, available and ready. This is especially true of those who feel the need to throw all their worries on to God (cf. *1 Pet 5:7*). Of course, I certainly do not think that we should abandon the other forms of service the Lord suggests to us on a daily basis, but finding the priest in church praying and interceding certainly restores to everyone an awareness of his more specific ministry, to which all are always invited to join, but which he cannot delegate.

There are questions...

These days, amidst fewer routine commitments and new challenges that could absorb us in a different way, reflection cannot but find new and necessary space. For my part, I have been contemplating for some time the questions raised by what we are experiencing, which has involved the country and the Church, suddenly sweeping away established programs and putting us in front of questions that we were not used to facing. We are accustomed to asking God questions with the implicit belief that he will answer them punctually and clearly. Today it is he who, through the daily news, questions us in a demanding and even dramatic way. These are the questions, the questions of God, that reach us in a direct and violent way through the perception of impending danger and the fear that subtly creeps in and agitates us. It is the fear of becoming ill and not finding help, of being confined to a resuscitation ward... it is the fear of dying.

We have banished pain and death from our culture

There are a lot of people with relatives in hospital or in quarantine at home. Already, many have had to face mourning for a loved one. All of us who grew up in a culture that shunned pain and death, suddenly find

ourselves today confronted with fragility and helplessness before a drama in which everyone will have to play their part. The impossibility of finding a safe refuge from an invisible enemy, anxiety or fear, are some of the ways in which pain takes a shape that troubles the soul and the mind, changing into anger or desperate, immobile resignation, if it cannot flow into the riverbed of charity. The Lord, without much apparent consideration, has brought us back to confront death, the inevitable and seemingly unbearable event that only the prospect of Easter allows us to face. The fear of death is at the origin of the evil that poisons life; it is the evil force that leads us and our contemporaries to accept the limitation of freedom, and even its renunciation. Faith in a life that continues beyond the fatal threshold is the foundation of hope, courage and forgiveness; the life that will be given and will be full is the goal to be reached, the precious treasure for the sake of which the capacity to bear everything is found. Faith in the resurrection is the creative force that gives life to a new and more just society. It is because of this faith that Paul can repeat the words of challenge already used by the Prophets: "Death has been swallowed in victory. Where, O death, is your victory?" (1 Cor 15:54-55).

In fact, it is the impending presence of death that urges the search for salvation. So, the Lord is focusing on a subject that we had overlooked, because today talking about resurrection and eternal life can be embarrassing. Yet it is necessary to return to talking about them without fear, even if there will be, as in Athens, those who walk away shaking their heads (cf. Acts 17:4).

Crazy wisdom

I do not think this is the time for exhortations of the "let's love each other" variety, although they could be useful. True charity, which is due to everyone and especially to those who feel the gravity of the situation, has nothing to do with sweet smiles, loving caresses, pats on the back and hot soup. The world expects much more from the Church than the first aid of alms. It expects reasons that will help people to accept and live with maturity what is happening. They urgently need serious reasons

to hope. They need someone capable of opening up different and true perspectives on the world, because the canvas on which for years the delusions of grandeur marking our age have been projected has suddenly been torn to reveal an anguishing darkness.

It is time for the Church to stop feeding those sweet sentimentalisms that make so much of our preaching unbearable and finally tell the world serious truths. The Church must tirelessly repeat to those who today, dazed by what is happening, seek "the" good reason to live and die that can be found in the death and resurrection of Jesus. And she must add that if this year we cannot celebrate Easter in the liturgy, it is no less the Lord himself who is celebrating it in the great liturgy of history who asks us to live with him in these difficult days.

In the Old Testament, history was often interpreted on the basis of the doctrine of retribution. Natural events, catastrophes and wars, like many other adverse events, were attributed to the punishing will of God, and the people as a whole, as well as individuals, had to seek the reason for the misfortune in their own lives and those of their families. This interpretative key made it possible to give order to things, to recognize precise responsibilities, to humbly accept the purifying punishment, and finally to change one's future by returning to the Lord. In this perspective, the trials of Exodus, the defeats, the destruction of Jerusalem and the loss of the land can be understood as a manifestation of God's justice and mercy.

This way of arguing – so instinctive – contrasts with the image of a God whom we know and conceive of as merciful in his infinite patience but rarely in the trials by which we are purified. After the temple was destroyed and with the impossibility of immolating sacrifices, the People of God rediscover the Word and begin to read it again, to study it... to listen to it and to hear in it the whisper of a loving God: "Listen, O Israel..." The Bridegroom, after the days of wrath, once again shows his face to the recovered bride, takes her into the desert to speak to her heart (cf. *Hos 2*) and consoles her.

When, according to the Books of the Maccabees, Antiochus Epiphanes put to death those who refused to sacrifice to idols, Israel is faced with a dramatic problem and wonders: if God does not protect life, what can the righteous do? (cf. *Psalm* 10:3). Are the wicked right to mock him by questioning: where is your God? (cf. *Psalm* 41:4). It is then that the Wisdom of Israel discovers and develops the doctrine of the survival of the soul, that is, of a life that continues beyond time. For God cannot allow those who have remained faithful to his covenant to perish. The fidelity of the Lord often escapes the eye of the people, but "appears" to the gaze of faith. In God's time, justice is done to the righteous and the wicked see with horror their guilt. The life that the Father has given to his creatures is forever. So death may sadden, but it does not have the power to make those who trust in him despair.

The Bible questions innocent suffering The Book of Job is a reflection on the mystery of evil that challenges the righteous. In that drama, the traditional answer, supported by friends who would like to console Job and lead him to an admission of non-existent guilt, does not hold up. There is a period when to Job, who insists on protesting his innocence, God, silent and distant, appears as an enemy. In fact God did not defend him from misfortune, nor did he support him before the accusations of his friends. Only at the end will the Lord appear on the scene and take the floor. He will not answer Job's questions, but will put him before the mystery of Creator Wisdom. Having reached the end of his misfortune, condemned even by those who had gone to console him but instead ending up judging him overwhelmingly, seeing him resolute in protesting his innocence, Job is left finally alone before God.

The scene seems suspended in an unfathomable silence: an insignificant being of dust and ashes stands before the terrible and fascinating majesty of the Lord. Job's final affirmation is surprising: "I knew you by hearsay. Now my eyes see you" (*Job* 42:5). God has not revealed to him the mystery of evil, but Job, through everything he has endured, has reached in the depths of his misery, the profound truth of his condition as a creature, the point – the only one – from which a person can fix his gaze

on the ineffable Mystery of the Father and find himself lost in it.

In the drama that upset everything and affected Job's dearest ones, God manifests himself to Job as the one who, despite appearances, holds his servant's life firmly in his hands. This is what we contemplate in the Easter Triduum. Today more than ever we must be able to propose the *Sapientia Crucis* to those who are scandalized by pain and death. To offer this Wisdom to the world is mercy that rises from dust and quenches the thirst of the soul: God dwells in the desert.

The Lord asks us to learn to think in a new way

We are faced with a new and unexpected situation for us that forces us to mature and develop a different way of thinking, to take on new attitudes, to seek new ways to serve God's people. The Lord speaks in history and asks us to accept with confidence his will, which is manifested above all in the evidence of the facts. But it is also transmitted by the positive law enacted by legitimate authority. Jesus obeyed the Father's plan by submitting himself concretely to the legitimate authority of his people and to the abusive authority of the Empire. Today more than ever we profess that God does not renounce his plan to restore all things in Christ, and he does so through a regeneration that always passes through the mystery of Easter. That is why Paul, writing to the Corinthians, goes straight to the sign: "I thought I knew nothing among you but Jesus Christ, and Christ crucified" (1 Cor 2:2). It is time we made those words our own: quietly, because they are heavy, without discounting them.

Taking up the weakness of Christ

We have been led by the Spirit to clothe Christ's weakness, so that it may appear clearly that what is good in it comes from him. It must make us reflect the fact that circumstances have "reduced" – so to speak – us priests to a temporary silence. All of us People of God – pastors and faithful – today are invited to listen to the Lord, who wants to speak to our

hearts, making us go through an experience that is waiting to be enlightened by his Word. This is what people have a right to expect from us. It is here that we can and must fully recover our task as humble disciples of the one Master, helping the little ones to “enkindle” the light of the Scriptures in order to grasp what the Lord is saying to the Churches and, as far as we are concerned, to the pilgrim Church in Babylon (the name by which the Book of Revelation indicates the city of Rome, cf. *Rev 17:5*).

The experience we share with the people entrusted to us takes us back to the roots of life and the Gospel. Just as we have not given ourselves life, we cannot give ourselves salvation. Since the end of the Second World War this is perhaps the first time that the whole nation has felt that it is under a threat that could be fatal; moreover, our country already looks with concern at the consequences at the economic level. Certainly, many things will have to change, starting from the way of thinking about life and relationships. Any astonishment at life and preserved health, while of lesser significance compared to those victims of the virus, should lead to a real conversion. Saint Ignatius, at the end of the First Week of Exercises (ES), invites the exercitant, finally aware of God’s benevolence, to stand before the Crucified One and ask: What can I do for you, who have done so much for me? (cf. ES 53). Everyone must be helped to live intensely this experience of danger and salvation; to be saved is a gift.

Cause for reflection: the failure of the enterprise

“Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth’” (*Gen 11:4*). In the biblical account, the people are represented in a very similar way to the Jews when they were slaves of Egypt. Here they make bricks to build the tower. They were not obliged to do so like Abraham’s sons, but they decided to do so themselves. The project they are working on is the construction of a tower “to make a name for themselves,” that is, to give

themselves the stability proper to a well-articulated and efficient system. Those men speak the same language and agree on a project. It is clear that it is not a people, but a mass: diversity has disappeared in favor of uniformity. The shared desire to feel secure is sought in likeness, not in communion. With the collapse of the tower, people are brought back to the structural limits of the human condition, but also to subjective appreciation of this of this. By losing the unity obtained at the price of submission to a single culture (language, project), they can recover their differences and riches and the space of freedom. People will be able to regain security not in submission but in the alliance formed between them.

For Western civilization, scientific progress has played and will continue to play a leading role. Its people have placed the utmost trust in it, considering the many certainties achieved through research as unassailable truths to which to entrust their fate. Those who breathe this culture are confident they will not be without the power to add a single day to their lives (cf. *Matt 6:27*).

So in times like the ones we are experiencing now, we see the cracks in the tower proudly rising up to touch the sky. The political and economic systems that regulate the life of nations and that seemed to be sure guarantors of well-being have already been shaken hard and their advocates must admit their fatigue (or inability?) to resist the challenges. We see that even the culture of rights – real or presumed – yields without discussion, in exchange for certainties that today seem more urgent. An invisible virus, born who knows where, has overcome all defenses and spreads, upsetting everything. It advances silently, striking the soul of the community, sowing suspicion; brothers and sisters look at each other with pain, fearing that the potentially lethal threat comes from their own blood; friends are divided by the fear that a poisonous threat may be hidden in their most cherished relationships. The virus has affected ties between people.

What is happening – we will realize when the emergency is over – is a

massive demolition of the certainties accumulated so far. We are witnessing the preparation of a new beginning in which much will be called into question. The vanity of the "name" that the people wanted to make for themselves by building the tower appears in its true guise. For the name is a gift from God (cf. *Rev 2:17; Isa 65:15*), and it will be the name with which he will call his Son's friends for eternal life. Thus God will build the city with firm foundations for the faithful people (cf. *Heb 11:10; Rev 21*); there will be neither tower nor temple, because the Almighty and the Lamb are his temple (cf. *Rev 21:22*).

In order to understand each other, it will be necessary to find a common language, or rather a new language that allows us to communicate in truth and to say what we really value, and to understand each other again as people who share the same history. The Church knows this language well, because it has been taught to her by the Spirit; indeed, it is the same Spirit infused into our hearts: "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth" (cf. *1 Cor 13:4-6*). This is the language that everyone is invited to employ from the beginning, waiting for it to resound in the song of a people.

Times of trial reveal the thoughts of our hearts

Living in confined spaces, the experience of many families, designed to sleep in more than to live in, lays bare the feelings of hearts, showing among other things whether the family is only a society of mutual aid or if it is instead a unique place where each person can feel welcomed and loved for what they are. If you really love each other, you can live in straitened circumstances, albeit with a lot of effort. But if love is not there, the shared space can be an unbearable prison.

Thus the circumstances that are imposed on us are truly demanding and we cannot postpone a radical conversion. Everyone, if he or she wants to live peacefully, must decide to put themselves aside and to become

neighbors, brothers and sisters, companions sharing the same fate and, finally, friends, because it is the labors lived together that give birth to and nourish friendships. Husbands and wives know something about this. It turns out that good feelings do not always come spontaneously and do not last long with the same intensity, but they need to be nurtured continuously, otherwise they die. The home these days offers everyone an experience of life that may be difficult. For everyone it will be a novelty to spend so much time together; it will certainly be a formidable school of humanity. We will see with what results.

A time of trial purifies our faith

Repeating that everything will go well – as one does with frightened children – has become a mantra to exorcise the fear that everything might go wrong! This is a fear that, in the end, betrays a radical distrust that also seemingly affects God. But that God who, in our opinion, should do exactly what one would expect of God, that is, defeat evil in a flash, does not exist. That “God” is an imaginary built by our needs and looks so much like the father who reassures the frightened child screaming against the darkness. Reality is putting us before the true God, the one who listens to the cry of Israel and makes Moses hear his voice; the one who pushes the people to set out and opens the sea to their passage. But in the end this God is not liked, because he forces those who really want to know him to go to the desert, where there is no food from Egypt and water is scarce. There, undergoing trials, the people will mature.

The city that was crowded

“How is it that the city that was crowded with people sits alone?” (*Lam* 1:1). These words opening the Book of Lamentations came to mind before the images of our Bishop Francis on Via del Corso on the afternoon of Sunday, March 15. In these days, Rome’s city center gleams in the splendor of the lights of spring, but is desolate and ghostly.

Many complain that among the restrictions imposed by the present

situation is the closure of churches. On the one hand, there are those who explain the decision on the grounds of public health. On the other, there are those who demand the free exercise of worship. And there are those who say that, even if no one goes to church because everyone is asked to drastically limit their movements, the open church is a sign of hope. All are reasons worthy of respect. It is necessary, however, to reflect without emotional impulses and to recognize that the situation the authorities are called to manage is of a complexity never seen before, some aspects of which we can barely grasp. Just as it must be recognized that, if the state does not impose the closure of places of worship and pastoral activities, it is to be expected that pastors will have a sense of responsibility toward their own faithful. (Here by pastors I mean primarily and specifically the bishops, who must be the first to respond before God for the people entrusted to them and in whom we priests must place sincere trust).

It must be recognized that it is not up to the Church, but to the state, to legislate on public health. Faced with a problem the gravity of which not everyone is yet fully convinced, this – and this alone – is the level on which decisions must be taken regarding access to places of worship, without recalling principles that are so ideological. In a time of emergency like the present, faith and devotion must find new ways. The open church may also be a sign of comfort, but if it is a “sign,” it is enough to open the cathedral, which is the mother Church of the diocesan community. Finally, how can we fail to recall what the Gospel of the Third Sunday of Lent (Year A) suggests: “The time has come, and this is the time in which neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will glory be given to God, but in spirit and truth” (*John 4:21*).

Churches are important, but in the end they are only tools that we hope to see again soon animated by festive communities. The true Church, the Church made up of people, thanks be to God, can live even without churches, as happened in the first centuries and as still happens in many parts of the world.

Here it is necessary to ask ourselves honestly and with much respect a question of no small importance for us pastors: is the protest against the closure of churches animated by faith or rather by a religiosity yet to be purified?

Eucharistic fasting

Be careful not to let false zeal entrap you! These times impose on us a Eucharistic fast, which is a novelty for us, while it is unfortunately a sad necessity in many regions of the world where priests are lacking or where Mass cannot be celebrated. We are witnessing a "desire for the Eucharist" which can be of comfort to us (the Italian Bishops' Conference has appropriately issued useful indications in this regard). Almost always the request expresses a desire that is the fruit of an intense spiritual life. But the attitude of some, certainly in good faith, makes us understand that there are important aspects to focus on.

In the too insistent request for the Eucharist there is often a sincere faith... but it is not a mature one. We forget that salvation comes from faith and not from works, even though they are holy. So, one may on good practices without trusting in God, to the point of valuing his gifts more than God himself. As children, we greedily grasp the gift without listening to the loving words of those who give it. You are more focused on your own cry than on the face of the One who bends down to listen to it. This tells us that there is a great deal of work to be done to help the faithful to grasp the meaning and depth of the Eucharistic Mystery and one can hope for great fruits from an effective catechesis. In the meantime, however, it is necessary to remind everyone that the Lord is truly present with his Spirit among those gathered in his Name; he is present in the Word and truly continues to "nourish" those who read and meditate on it. The living Lord becomes close to us in the poor and the needy. The Lord is in the very desire for the sacraments. But above all he has his dwelling place in those who keep his commandments and share his feelings, without which not even frequent communion can bear the fruits of eternal life.

We priests have been configured to Christ the priest

As for us priests, the words "Do this in memory of me" commit us in a special way. Thanks to the laying on of hands that has configured us to Christ the priest, it is in our own person that Christ the shepherd who knows the sheep one by one and takes care of them manifests himself. In this sense we are constituted as an epiphany and true sacrament of the presence of God in the midst of his people. Therefore, as we celebrate the Memorial, we also commit ourselves and all our resources. Our presence becomes the bearer of his grace; our prayer is united to the prayer of Christ the priest so that the Father, remembering the love of his Son, may be merciful toward his people. Probably today our way of being among the people should manifest the Lord's serene, strong and patient love, a love that nourishes trust. Here I am reminded of a prayer that was taught to us during the Exercises: "Take, Lord, and accept all my freedom, my memory, my intellect and all my will; what I have and possess, all is yours! All things are yours at your will. Give me your love and grace, and this is enough for me" (ES 234).

A key to understanding: condemned to the same punishment

There is a text from the Gospel of Luke that can help us understand the meaning of the human condition, the limits it imposes and death itself. In his account, the evangelist tells of Jesus on the cross with the two criminals crucified with him and how one of them, in despair, reproaches Jesus for his failure to act by saying: "If you are the Christ, save yourself and us!" Jesus is silent, but it is his fellow criminal who intervenes with a reproach that we can all make our own: "Have you no fear of God, you who are condemned to the same punishment? We, rightly, because we are receiving what we have deserved for our actions; but he has done nothing wrong." Then he said: "Jesus, remember me when you enter your kingdom" (*Luke 23:39-42*). Before the mystery of pain and death, the reasons suggested by the intellect are of little use. And it is not much

consolation to think that everyone has limited responsibility for his or her own fate. On the contrary, it comforts us to realize that what we are living, whatever it may be, is shared by Jesus, who "did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross" (*Phil 2:6-8*).

Every time history makes us feel more acutely the mystery of our limitations, we should be helped to understand that, whatever the reason, we are brought closer to the heart of God's Mystery. He, by sending the Son to take on the human condition and living it without any qualification, has manifested his loving closeness to the creature. From this point of view, pain and death are also grace, because in the light of the Word of God we not only understand that we have not been left alone, but on the contrary we have been called to enter with our flesh into a mystery which, in Jesus' disfiguring, transfigures.

Blessed are those who have received from the Spirit the ability to receive and live in peace this communion of life and destiny with the Son of God! The one who in the midst of the turmoil of the world, will feel in his heart the answer to his prayer: "Today you will be with me..." (*Luke 23:43*). Whoever agrees to live the human adventure in the faith of the Son of God will always be with him: whoever dies with him, lives with him. This is the new life. This is what we have to say to people, that is, to the people to whom we have been sent to serve.

This year we will have to come up with something different to the usual way of making the Easter announcement resonate. Maybe we shall finally find attentive ears. Here I cannot but remember the *Anima Christi*, a prayer so dear to Saint Ignatius: "Soul of Christ, sanctify me. Body of Christ save me. Blood of Christ inebriate me. Water from the side of Christ, wash me. Passion of Christ comfort me. O good Jesus, hear me. In your wounds, hide me. Do not let me be parted from you. From the evil enemy, defend me. At the hour of my death, call me. Let me come to you

to praise you, with all the saints forever and ever. Amen.”^[2]

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[1]. The text that we present to readers is that of a pastoral letter from Bishop Libanori, auxiliary of Rome for the Central Sector. It was sent to the parish priests of his sector on March 19 last. We report the Letter in its entirety, with a minor intervention that puts into the footnotes the initial and final parts. The letter begins with the words: “Dear brothers and friends of the central sector, I know I run the risk of being intrusive; however, I take the liberty of sharing with you some reflections developed in these days under the stimulus of what we are all experiencing. These are thoughts in freedom that I offer you as a spiritual communication, with the desire to express my closeness to each one of you, who, I imagine, is troubled as much and more than I am by the difficult novelty of the moment.”

[2]. The Letter concludes as follows: “I have detained for a long time those who have managed to read this far ... but what do you want? The stimuli for reflection are many. Be patient with me. May the Lord support us. May our Mother intercede for our Bishop Francis, for the Presbytery of Rome and for us, so that when we open our mouths we may be given a frank word to make known the mystery of the Gospel, of which we are ambassadors, and we may proclaim it frankly, as is our duty (cf. *Eph* 6:19-20).”