

Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

June 28, 2020

Homily of Most Reverend Mario Yamanouchi Michiaki

Bishop of the Diocese of Saitama

I will sing of your steadfast love, O Lord, forever; (Psalm 89)

... whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. (Matthew 10:37-42)

In this Sunday's Gospel, Jesus speaks about the cross that we, both as an individual and as a group, must take up without giving up. I would like to reflect with you once again on the cross that humanity has been carrying for these several months of the year 2020: the pandemic of the new coronavirus (COVID-19).

Through the Internet as well as newspapers and magazines, I have become aware of the gravity of the situation and have been feeling helpless against the spread of this coronavirus. I hope this brief reflection in the form of a homily will help us better understand what is going on now and how we should act in relation to the family and other people.

In the face of the rapid contagion of COVID-19 and its high fatality, the governments of all nations have tried hard to stop it by declaring the state of emergency and have imposed restrictions of various levels up to social quarantine, which has forced the closure of schools, meeting centers, businesses, places of relaxation, etc. No country has been sufficiently prepared to deal effectively with this pandemic.

I admire, above all, the doctors and nurses who are in direct contact with the infected, as well as those who have had to give a dignified burial to those who died from COVID-19. As Catholics, let us continue to pray every day, especially offer the prayer that the Catholic Bishops of Japan proposed to us.

### **Living in the time of the new coronavirus**

A few days ago I received the magazine, *La Civiltà Cattolica Iberoamericana* (No. 39, April 2020), where I found an article by Fr. Andrea Vicini, SJ, entitled: "Life in the Time of Coronavirus" (pp. 32-42). The author refers to four books that describe how it is possible to

live in the time of an epidemic.

We begin with the Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez who, a few years after receiving the 1982 Nobel Prize for Literature, published the novel, *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985). A century earlier, the Swedish doctor Axel Munthe, who had gone to Naples to care for the victims of the cholera epidemic, wrote his collection of letters: *Letters from a Mourning City* (1885).

“In both cases, an epidemic caused by the bacterium *Vibrio cholerae* is the background for deeply human stories (imaginary in Márquez’s novel and real in Munthe’s letters). Márquez and Munthe invite us to contemplate how it is possible to live ‘in the time’ of an epidemic, as involuntary witnesses of human suffering, eager to help the most needy and aware of the risks of contagion.” We’re all invited to see we can live in a time like this with these three: the call to be witnesses to face the human suffering, the unshakable hope to help the most needy and the correct awareness of the risk of infection.

“In addition to these two books, literature has not failed to offer exemplary material that helps us understand how people live during epidemics, and how much they suffer. Among the many works, above all, is *The Betrothed* by Alessandro Manzoni (1827), about the plague that afflicted the north of the Italian peninsula in the years 1629-31, which was one of the last outbreaks of the centuries-old plague pandemic – the Black Death – that had its climax on the European continent around 1350.”

“Secondly, in his novel *The Plague* (1947), Albert Camus plunges us into the drama, based on plague that overwhelmed the Algerian city of Oran in 1849, inviting us to question the nature and fate of the fragile human condition. In times of cholera or plague, we ask ourselves who we are, how we are to live, what causes all this and where is our God when we suffer. As we search for answers, what emerges is the urgent need for care, with a special focus on the poorest and most vulnerable.”

### **Urgency of conversion: changing our image of God**

We're all in danger. We can contract the infection and transmit it to others, thus living the double role of victims and spreaders of the infection. We do not yet have an effective vaccine or specific therapies except for what the world has now and what it has been doing

to prevent the spread of the infection.

We must consider “health as a precious, indispensable and essential good for individuals and for the whole of humanity. Consequently, everything that protects and preserves the health of citizens and the environment is an ethical priority and requires appropriate and proportionate commitments and investments. Investing in what promotes health is to focus on the future, whether it is to develop basic health structures that provide primary care, or ... developing new forms of prevention, diagnosis and therapy for multiple diseases.”

“Good ‘health’ is, at the same time and inseparably, a good that is personal and social, ... local and global. But the common good of health is vulnerable and requires protection and vigilance.”

In our view of God's way of acting, we must refuse to “attribute to God the responsibility for the bad things that are happening in the world”. God does not send us punishments for our wickedness and our sins in the form of viral infections and pandemics. The God of the Bible whom we believe is “Emmanuel, the God with us, the compassionate God who accompanies us in every aspect of our lives, who takes all our sins upon himself, who ... is at work to promote, heal and liberate creation and creatures, respecting both human freedom and that of the whole nature and the universe.”

“In the times of the coronavirus, conversion also concerns the idolatrous images of God that continue to deceive us with false projections of a so-called ‘divine justice’, made in our image and likeness, instead of inviting us to contemplate Jesus Christ who died and rose again for the love of everyone and the whole world, and to live ahead of time in the light of the grace of the resurrection and divine salvation, which guide and accompany us from now and forever.”

Note: All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition (NRSVCE).