

LIVE WITH HOPE

Friar Bob Hutmacher, ofm



If you've read my columns over the years you know that I am quite enamored with the Middle Ages, as a result of years of Franciscan research and the music of that period. The panel on the left is from a 1349 book by Gilles li Muisit about the ravages of the Black Death, known medically as Bubonic Plague. On the right a nurse in an ICU tends to patients suffering from the Covid 19 virus that is assaulting our world. It may be unsettling to make a comparison with the 14th century, but I believe we must deepen our faith during this modern plague so we can live with hope. Let's take a look at the past.

The Civilization of the Middle Ages by Norman F. Cantor is a classic, exhaustive study of that period. He wrote that between 1214 and 1294 there were no major wars within Europe. The Crusades were in full production as popes called all of Europe to send troops to the Middle East. This period of peace explains many things about Francis of Assisi (involved in civil disputes and local battles in his youth) and why he traveled to Egypt in 1219 to experience the world of Islam. Also brewing in this period and on into the 14th century was a redistribution of population from urban centers to rural settings. Coinciding with this movement was the great changes in class distinction. Francis' father was a successful cloth merchant. The nobles were not used to people in their towns who had disposable income. For centuries nobility owned all the land, serfs worked it and paid rent. But this rising class in the middle was perplexing. It had an effect on family structure which was the foundation of all things medieval. And for this new middle class of merchants and the working class, their family structure was closer to our modern nuclear family, not the inherited titles, lands and wealth of nobility.

As the 13th century drew to a close, European civilization was assuaged with economic depression and wars. What began in what some historians called "the greatest of all centuries" devolved into widespread gaps between the haves and have-nots, exactly as we experience in this country today when perhaps 1% of the population controls or amasses the entire 'worth' of the middle class! (According to Forbes magazine in November 2019, there are 18.6 millionaires in the United States. 18.6 million!). That is an unfathomable divide that was just as vast in the 14th century.

One of the economic burdens at the time was the total loss of workers due to death by the Black Death. For example, silver was the metal of currency exchange in northern Europe and as mines became emptied, the silver shortage had a drastic economic effect. Another horrible thing: a series of severe winters that shortened the growing season and reduced harvests to a bare minimum. Starvation.

The most catastrophic factor in the 14th century, however, was the Bubonic Plague, or Black Death. Some historians estimate that this horrid disease decimated 25% and up to **40%** of the population of Europe. **40%!** Presently the population of the U.S. is 331,002,651 people; 40% of that would be nearly

133,000,000 deceased in the U.S. alone. The bacillus *Yersina pestis*, discovered in the late 19th century, also killed countless animals, the major source of food for the medieval populace. Entire villages disappeared, major cities like Florence lost untold numbers of citizens and it reached from Italy to England in Europe, to say nothing of widespread destruction in Asia.



Boccaccio's *Decameron* was written between 1348-53 as Florence was besieged by the plague. It's 100 stories told by a group of seven women and three men who were sequestered outside Florence to escape the disease. Along with some astute observations about the changing economic values and practices of Italy in the 14th century, his descriptions of the Black Death are hair raising.

1918 again. 2020 again. The World Health Organization classified the monster coronavirus among us COVID-19 on February 11. It defined it as "a pneumonia of unknown cause" detected in Wuhan, China and was first reported to the WHO on Dec. 31, 2019. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of WHO, spoke on April 15 to let the world know that "our commitment to public health, science and to serving all the people of the world without fear or favor remains absolute." And so it has, regardless of negative press and treatment by some nations. The Director-General continued: "For now our focus, my focus, is on stopping this virus and saving lives. WHO is grateful to the many nations, organizations and individuals who have expressed their support and commitment to WHO in recent days, including their financial commitment. We welcome this demonstration of global solidarity, because solidarity is the rule of the game to defeat COVID-19." Scientists have been unleashed in a global search for an immunization vaccine and outright cure. The world watched China suffer, then the monster made its way into Western Europe, creating terror in Italy and eventually all of that continent. We are surrounded by and overwhelmed by the very word **pandemic**, a strange word seldom heard. But certainly, people the world over know now what it means and how it effects the world's people.

I celebrated Eucharist for the last time at Ascension of Oak Park where I minister on Friday, March 13. The doors of St. Peter's in the Loop were locked at 4:30 p.m., Saturday, March 14. We were immersed into the pandemic overnight, not realizing the implications that this illness would hold for our lives. Months of unresolved grief, economic destruction and spiritual abandonment have inundated our existence. The Black Death of the 14th Century has become the reality of our worldwide populace and the very fabric of our lives. The Church has suffered great losses. In Italy alone (as of April 15) 109 priests have died in Italy, most of whom contracted the coronavirus from those they served bravely. Pope Francis has prayed and preached daily about COVID-19, celebrated the magnificent liturgies of Holy Week and Easter in an empty St. Peter's Basilica. On April 17 he presented "a plan for rising up again" in a reflection. He's greatly concerned about the millions infected and over 140,000 deaths worldwide from the coronavirus and said that *our experience today mirrors in many ways that of the disciples of Jesus after his death and burial in the tomb. Like them, we live surrounded by an atmosphere of pain and uncertainty. We ask "who will roll away the stone from the tomb? And we can ask that of ourselves in our hearts, can't we? To whom do we turn for consolation and hope in the face of international tragedy and overwhelming suffering? What is our source of HOPE when we live with such devastation around us?*

My homily for the 2nd Sunday of Easter was a brief look at Thomas' doubt and the fear of all the disciples as they went into hiding after the execution of Jesus. They were crippled by their fear of being discovered as "one of his own" and may have had to face the same fate as the one they followed. In the middle of all their doubts and trepidation, Jesus appeared. And the very first word from his mouth and heart was "peace". The first word of the Risen Lord. **Peace**. You'll find that in appearance stories besides John 21; Jesus says "peace be with you" in Luke 24:36 also. We need to take the Lord's message to heart in the midst of this pandemic. He'd encouraged them to touch his wounds. Thomas did not touch him, but when he saw Jesus, he believed. And in the Gospel of John, to 'see' is to 'believe.' When the disciples believe and try to comprehend his risen visage, Jesus breathes on them and imparts the power to forgive the sins of others. They gradually come to fully understand the depth of meaning of the Lord's death and resurrection; when filled with the Holy Spirit they, in turn, took that peace and forgiveness to the world, as Jesus commanded. They imbued the world with hope of a better life yet to come for all people.



I interpret this scenario this way: when I am at peace within my heart, then I become a conduit of God's forgiveness because I know God has forgiven and accepted me as I am and can be a minister of God's reconciliation to others (2 Cor. 5). Every single one of us is pushed to the limits these days in terms of being patient. There's no certainty as to how long we must "stay home, save lives" in Chicago. We have no possible date as to when our churches can reopen and everyone has access to the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist. We don't know who is positive with Covid-19. We don't know when our children will be able to learn again in a classroom setting. We have no idea who will be in the White House next, nor do we know when scientists will find a vaccine that can destroy this horrid virus. Can my spouse and I really handle things financially? How many widows and widowers living alone will soon not be able to fend for themselves? How many more deaths must we see each day? Endless questions without answers! How long will shops and restaurants be closed? Where do we find hope? Go to Jesus!

Be attentive to your dreams these days. I read a fascinating article in National Geographic last week online about dreams during these plague days. Our dreams reveal the reality in our conscious world. Fear and tension will cause unusual dreams, particularly nightmares, yet some victims have comforting dreams of childhood. Sleep patterns are disrupted because our daily routines have been shattered. If possible, record your dreams and learn from them. Reread John 20: the disciples were hiding in FEAR, just as we are. Go to Jesus! Whether it's fear of losing a business or concern for your children – our broken lives need something stable. Go to Jesus! Even if we face death itself, go to Jesus! I've seen the effects of Covid-19 (and will spare you the details); it's an ugly, unrelenting beast. But our God is ever-present to us in the beautiful days and in these periods of darkness. Remember this story of the disciples – it is OUR story. We can be full of fear until we 'see' the Risen Lord. Let him fill your heart, your life, your family with that peace that's beyond understanding and with eternal hope of deliverance. Medieval civilization found hope in God and we do too. Go to Jesus!

You need to know that we friars at St. Peter's gather twice daily for prayer in our chapel. We are very, very blessed to be able to celebrate the Eucharist each day. What you also need to know is that not one prayer session goes without mentioning YOU. We remember the thousands of people who come here to meet the Lord in the Eucharist, to seek God's forgiveness or learn about our faith. We are mindful that after six weeks of this church being dark – we miss you very, very much. So if you are down because you have to live without Mass, you must know that you are never, ever alone. You keep us going all year and we have you with us for however long these days of containment will last. Remember how Jesus calmed the fears of Thomas and the disciples with that one word, **peace**. That is my/our prayer for you always. We pray for those who suffer and die because of Covid-19, for those who care for them in any way, those who protect and care for us in so many ways. We pray that God will bring healing and that scientists will use the wisdom God has given them to find a cure. May the Lord fill you with hope and his **peace** today and always.

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