This Isn't Our First Plague BY DECLAN LEARY

Christendom has seen a plague or two in its day. On more than one occasion a worse pestilence than that which we now face has plunged the West into chaos, or brought it to a grinding halt. In every extraordinary time, however, the Church has remained *semper idem* and has remained, at the very least, open.

Christendom understood as a political entity may even have its roots in such crises. The followers of Christ and His Church found themselves in a new position of influence only after the pagan empire was plunged into severe crisis, more than once, and found need for new solutions and, in fact, for a new worldview altogether. The Antonine Plague which decimated Rome in the late second century AD caused a standstill in the civil society of the city and a crisis in the political and military functions of the Empire, but it actually sparked a revival of religious practice in general and coincided—not without reason—with the rapid spread of Christianity through the Empire at that time. The secular world could not grapple with a plague; the Church could.

In the next century, St. Cyprian of Carthage watched a plague tear through his diocese and believed that the end of days was near. In a powerful sermon (preserved for us under the title *De mortalitate*), Cyprian exhorted his flock not to fear the pestilence, for the worst it could bring was death, and "it is for him to fear death who is not willing to go to Christ." It is easy to dismiss Cyprian's position as idealistic, detached from the reality of the plague in the streets. But it was quite the opposite. In fact, the bishop had spent much time with those who were suffering, and *De mortalitate* contains graphic descriptions of the horrors that the illness inflicted on the body.

Cyprian considered this suffering a test of faith—not in the abstract, not as a platitude, but because the faithful of his time would truly be judged on their actions under the pressure of the crisis: "That pestilence and plague which seems horrible and deadly, searches out the righteousness of each one, and examines the minds of the human race..." With these haunting words, Cyprian called his people to live out the Christian life even more fully and courageously in the face of bodily death. "There is no advantage in setting forth virtue by our words," he warned, "and destroying the truth by our deeds."

Today, faced with a disease that though dangerous is far milder than the plague of Cyprian's day, churches the world over have closed their doors in hopes of stemming the spread. The most extreme of these measures, perhaps, is the suspension of public Masses in all U.S. Catholic dioceses. The prudence that runs parallel to these church closures must be acknowledged: a great deal of suffering may be avoided if measures are taken to prohibit large gatherings of people. The plagues of history may well have been mitigated had our ancestors shared our understanding of contagious disease—though the ancients were not entirely ignorant of such things, as we often assume.

We can learn from the mistakes of our forebears, and it may be in part *because* of such learning that the current pandemic is so much milder than those of the past. A healthy combination of epidemiology and common sense will indeed recommend the curtailing of such luxuries as movie theaters, restaurants, and bars, and even near necessities like out-of-

home employment. But whether the Church ought to be lumped in with the economic, civil, and social organs that require retuning under pressure is a different question altogether, with an altogether different answer.

Let us take for granted the most fantastic predictions of this moment's prophets of doom: if public Masses are allowed to continue, thousands (if not millions) will contract COVID-19 in church, and the stress placed on the global economy and healthcare system will create a catastrophic ripple effect; millions will die. If these predictions are valid, is it justifiable to suspend public Masses to forestall those deaths? Only if we accept one crucial proposition: that it is better to live without the Eucharist than to die with it.

Padre Pio of Pietrelcina, a saint with a unique popular devotion in the Church today, had a clear answer: "If we only knew how God regards this Sacrifice, we would risk our lives to be present at a single Mass." In a time and place when these words have hardly ever been more than hypothetical, this quote has remained one of the friar's most enduring and widespread. But these are not mere words, this is not mere bread, and we are not mere bodies. Pio meant what he said: the Eucharist, the source and summit of the Christian life, *is worth that life.*

Many of the faithful, in an admirable attempt to defend the bishops in their decision, have insisted that church closures must not be taken as a sign of little faith. We cannot, of course, know the hearts of those who mandated the closures, and we do owe fidelity to the leaders of the Church. But if we truly believe that we find life at the altar, we ought to have no fear about losing it on the way there. That belief is being tested, as Padre Pio knew it would be, and "there is no advantage in setting forth virtue by our words, and destroying the truth by our deeds."

The recently canonized John Henry Newman offered a dramatic summary of the Church's belief in the primacy of care for the soul: "She holds that it were better for sun and moon to drop from heaven, for the earth to fail, and for all the many millions who are upon it to die of starvation in extremest agony, as far as temporal affliction goes, than that one soul, I will not say, should be lost, but should commit one single venial sin..." The novel coronavirus makes no threats at tearing down the sun or the moon; even at its very worst it cannot possibly cause the earth to fail. If it cannot do these, can our fear of it be used to justify the denial of sacramental grace?

St. Cyprian would not have hesitated to answer. Nor, I suspect, would the One whose words were real to him and become real to us again: "And fear ye not them that kill the body, and are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him that can destroy both soul and body in hell."

Image: Piazza Mercatello During the Plague of 1656 *by Domenico Gargiulo*
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