

Global threats urge for a “Culture of care”¹

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Abstract

The recent pandemic has brought many troubles to our world. At the same time, however, it gives modern man the opportunity to reflect on his fragility, but also to look at those who are next to us and need our help. Many people who were already experiencing difficulties in their lives were faced with unprecedented problems. If we want to move our lives forward, however, we must look to all those cases where our own help and presence is needed. After all, our world has become such that their own security means our own well-being. Thus, we have to develop a strong culture of care in many ways. This is also how we essentially take care of ourselves. But the most important thing is that then our daily life will also make sense.

Keywords: care, culture of care, vulnerability, threats, challenges, security, compassion

Introduction

We are living in the pain of isolation, where survival depends on distancing from others, sometimes beloved and close ones. The global test to which all humanity is subject makes us perceive it not only as the spread of a disease, but as a full crisis, precisely as the coexistence of many crises brought together (Mares, 2020). This means deterioration of the tragedies that were already in progress and at the same time the appearance of threats that bring us to situations in which we can understand

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the position of the weak (Pontifical Academy, 2020a, 1-2; Pontifical Academy, 2020b, 1-2). And speaking of uncertainty, or more specifically of risk ethics, it means that some others have fallen into a much worse position than we actually do (Pontifical Academy, 2020b, 2, 5).

Probably, this is a very crucial issue. All humans tend to consider their own problems as huge ones and to ignore other peoples' sufferings. But our very sense of morality imposes a rather wide sight of contemporary's *conditio humana*. We ought to keep in mind all those global brothers and sisters who try to get winners from their daily survival struggle. That is, to "think globally and act locally"; to help those being close to us, and simultaneously strengthen structures dedicated to assist those who are far from us.

In this paper we attempt to take an idea of what happens right now globally from this global *corona-crisis*. Actually, we are going to take a glance on specific groups that their social position got deeply worst since this new disease passed the gates of their daily life; and finally, we reflect on this "philanthropic tomorrow" is expecting us in crisis' next days.

New issues crisis posed

One of the most vulnerable groups affected by the pandemic is that of **children**. In some cases, we can talk about a straight abuse of children's rights, even for a total *child's rights disaster*. The recorded increase in cases of domestic violence during the quarantine period, the abstention from the school process and the general psychological pressure constitute a scenario of harsh reality for them (Johnston, 2020; Twahirwa, 2021). Things are clearly worse considering those issues in combination with poverty: there is a risk of an increase in child marriage, a raise in malnutrition and „food insecurity“ and fears of an increase also in child mortality (Johnston, 2020; Twahirwa, 2021; Lancet, 2021).

Poverty, however, is an issue by itself: Global north-south gap is widening, as rich countries reduce humanitarian aid to offset the economic losses caused by the pandemic. The test of the limits of existence in everyday life is the relevant experience in south since the conditions of poverty are expressed as constant uncertainty. In addition, the emphasis on coping with the virus increases the risk of other deadly diseases plaguing these societies (Pontifical Academy, 2020a, 2-3; Johnston, 2020). At least, it is fortunate that new techniques used to create

COVID-19 vaccines could be applied to other diseases, such as malaria (Johnston, 2020).

Of course, similar threats concern vulnerable groups in all countries. **Minorities** and **homeless**, for example, are found to be more exposed to the transmission of the disease - and of course, carry greater health risks for the whole of society. Many policy predictions are made to address this problem, but in some cases real needs of these people are overlooked; such case is for example the fact that the relatively few members of these groups wishing to be vaccinated will have to travel long distances for this purpose (Parveen, 2021; Smith, 2021, A1, A8; Oreskes, 2021, B1-2; Coletta, 2021, A12).

Things become literally tragic in cases of **war** or civil conflicts for civilians. In the general turmoil that already exists and is exacerbated by the pandemic, governments are becoming more authoritarian and health restrictions are hampering the work of humanitarian organizations. For the most vulnerable groups of the population, women and children, it is estimated that *the indirect effects of armed conflict are far greater than the direct effects of a real battle* (Johnston, 2020; Lancet, 2021).

In present difficulties, all these contemporary **weak ones** seek our attention: this is especially true for people in older ages and people in special needs (Pontifical Academy, 2020a, 6; Smith, 2021, A8; Bellaspiga, 2021, 7). After all, interconnection is – fortunately or unfortunately – a visible reality in our world. The pandemic underscores this in the most emphatic way. The fragility of everyone was aware and, in many cases, this translated into solidarity. Empathy for the helpless is present, as it is increasingly realized that the „game“ is played at all levels and especially in its weakest links, so the building of trust relationships has regained a new importance (Pontifical Academy, 2020a, 2; Pontifical Academy, 2020b, 1-4; Coletta, 2021, A12).

Unfortunately, however, the structures and mentalities of **injustice** and **inequality** seem to remain in place, (ineffective) isolation among populations is considered a priority and areas of cooperation are shrinking. It is clear, rather, that despite their high cost, we do not seem to be benefiting from the pandemic lessons: the hope of vaccines seems to be too late to reach much of our world, while we already know that half of the 4 known coronavirus variants come from so-called Third World (Pontifical Academy, 2020b, 4-5; Mares, 2020; Parveen, 2021; Coletta,

2021, A12; Bellaspiga, 2021, 7). This widening of inequalities sometimes makes the declarations of those in charge sound loud: in fact, we are not all together in what we are going through, and the bitterness of abandonment is experienced mainly by those who remain invisible by the morality and egoism of what is considered „capable“ members of society (Pontifical Academy, 2020b, 2; Parveen, 2021; Kukla, 2021).

Of course, this is not a purely new pathogenesis. The timeless „**ignorance**“ of those who do not meet the standards of society’s acceptance largely foreshadowed what would come in conditions of general insecurity. Despite our unquestionable progress, our mentality, law, cognitive orientations take almost exclusively into account anyone who has autonomy and is far from wear and tear and weakness. The rest are invisible or merely expendable, as dictated by the notion of ableism, ageism, sizeism, etc. (Levin, 2020; Kukla, 2021)

A special impetus to this trend, at least in our times, was given by the **overconfidence in technology** and the positivist suggestions it showed. But what happened (and wasn’t completely unpredictable) tested the strength of our most powerful systems and pushed the boundaries of our science to shake the illusions of our over-optimism and reveal the magnitude of our weaknesses and complacency (Pontifical Academy, 2020a, 2; Magatti, 2020, 3).

Of course, it wouldn’t be necessary to take things this turn. There are some constants in our lives, and among them is the fact of fragility that governs us, as well as the inherent uncertainty of our existence. Therefore, we did not necessarily need a total destabilization of ourselves and our society to recognize that in the dilemmas posed by experience, we have a moral obligation to recognize our fellow human beings in life and not to reduce them and all things of our world exclusively to an **egocentric perspective**. Evil is dealt with by eliminating our passions and meanness and especially by human cooperation, where one can fill in the gaps of the other. Another collective disease, after all, the environmental one, had emerged several decades ago and with its emphatic consequences had taught us many lessons in this direction. Ultimately, then, we should have proven to be „better students“ and learned more from the ecological threats occurred. (Pontifical Academy, 2020a, 1-6; Pontifical Academy, 2020b, 2-3).

So how do we get out of the impasse of our lack of autonomy and wounded freedom? The answer is obviously by seeking the meaning of the mystery that surrounds us, in its invisible manifestations, and recognizing the untapped possibilities of this freedom. This different one existential understanding of it, however, presupposes a **recognition of our fragility** and an opening to the **transcendental of existence**. And Christian teaching, precisely, brings together these two privileged views of the present and the future in the practice of philanthropy. The core of the gospel message focuses precisely on the search for God through brother's and sister's person. Moreover, anyone who claims that loves God but hates his brother is considered a liar (cf. *1 Jn* 4, 17). The summary of the Christian commandments is, after all, the double commandment of love: both to God and to fellow human beings. It would not be an exaggeration, then, to say that the inner truth of Christian spirituality is its sociability. In Christian practice, the vertical sociability (towards God) intersects the horizontal (towards the fellow human beings) and there it meets the completion of its content (Mantzarides, 2015, 287-288). The dual path of fragility and spirituality is thus proposed as the essence of approaching the impasses of civilization: the soul of the transformative experience is caring for and giving to the helpless *Other* person, as an act of central importance for our existence. When we recognize that the world is not exhausted in us and those around us, that salvation is not synonymous with our health, we can truly save our health as well (Pontifical Academy, 2020a, 3-4; Pontifical Academy, 2020b, 2-4; Levin, 2020; Magatti, 2020, 3). Certainly, health is a supreme human good. But when it is getting something absolute, like everything else in this world, it becomes another idol, obscuring the way we see our lives.

Openness to the other, to the common good, means that we get out of ourselves just to live. By recognizing the **interconnectedness** of freedom, we recognize what our common human nature dictates - and this awareness means inspiration for social sensitivity and involvement (Pontifical Academy, 2020a, 3-4, 7; Pontifical Academy, 2020b, 1; Levin, 2020; Magatti, 2020, 3).

And it is definitely worth mentioning that among the parameters of the moral challenge posed by the pandemic is not simply our obligations to fragile groups, but the moral hazard of withdrawing from our responsibilities. The **commitment to mutual assistance** stems not only

from the vulnerability of our common nature, but also from the duty of the synergy of building a more humane society. Taking responsibility for each other leads to brotherhood between people and deepens the non-negotiability of their dignity. In the scale of our priorities and balancing of our values, we must set man as our end-in-himself and never merely as our means (Pontifical Academy, 2020a, 1, 5; Pontifical Academy, 2020b, 5-7; Levin, 2020; Murray, 2021, 22-23).

This means, first and foremost, solidarity at the institutional level, which will show in practice our **willingness to change**, or if you prefer in a more spiritual way, to repentance. It also means vigilance against structural discrimination, whether political or economic, the cultivation of a humanitarian spirit of law and the development of multilateral international cooperation, which will inspire further care from the people - with the awareness, of course, that all these are costly and risk, which will pass through delicate balances, for the sake of a more humane future. They are projects that require readiness, awareness of the conditions, creativity, and a vision as a wider perspective (Pontifical Academy, 2020a, 1-2; Pontifical Academy, 2020b, 5-8; Levin, 2020; Lancet, 2021).

It is equally necessary to view life as a non-exclusively biological event. The moral demand for overcoming divisions and discrimination is thus turned out a bioethical principle and is exemplified in the **function of science as an act of cooperation** rather than competition. Awareness of our technological limits will guarantee the wisdom of our choices and therefore it will become an act of collective humility. The development of the ethics of scientific research and its emancipation from political and economic interests signal the (necessary for building a culture of solidarity) alliance of science with ethics and humanism (Pontifical Academy, 2020a, 1, 3-5; Pontifical Academy, 2020b, 6).

As mentioned earlier, caring for human person is a function of our wider existence. It goes beyond narrow confines of a religious duty, just as the philanthropic view of history gets over the bipolar pattern of punishment and retribution. This also reminds us of the categorization of believers, according to the Christian tradition: it is the “slaves” who fear the punishment of Hell; the “hired” who desire the reward of Paradise; and, finally, the “sons” or the “free”, who simply love God, without the need for fear or expectation of reward (Basil the Great, 895B). In the context of the apprenticeship in this new vision, the culture of care is

given as a prophetic testimony of a universal brotherhood. There prayer becomes action and acquires its essential meaning. It is the **meaning of life**, thanks to which, decay and death hurt our existence, however without weakening the bonds of compassion and love. Thus, the thankful (that is eucharistic) attitude towards life given to us, is transformed into a way of rebirth of life. In the same way, the deeper spiritual question posed by the pandemic situation is at the same time answered: now that we have experienced our fragility and our need for the other, are we able to create a fairer and more compassionate world? (Pontifical Academy, 2020a, 1, 3, 6-7; Pontifical Academy, 2020b, 1, 5; Mares, 2020; Murray, 2021, 23)

Taking care of our vulnerable fellow human beings is tantamount to taking care of ourselves: recent events have shown us in many ways that in all of our globalized reality, „**solus insecure, nullus insecure**“, if one is not safe, then no one remains safe. The culture of caring spans a wide range: from fair and charitable thinking to the urgent need for international cooperation, with an emphasis on helping the least developed countries. In between it includes taking care to eliminate any kind of discrimination (age, race, etc.), seeking access for all to basic goods and giving a step so that all those who do not have a voice can be heard. This also means avoiding passivity and underestimating what is happening and facilitating terms they are willing to offer their services to the neighbor. The threats and challenges are now such in our lives, that the promotion of the content and the activation of the values of humanity is of equal importance with the medical research (Pontifical Academy, 2020a, 1, 4-5; Pontifical Academy, 2020b, 6, 8; Levin, 2020; Johnston, 2020; Coletta, 2021, A12).

Conclusions

It is very important for the advent of a crisis not to be a deterrent to our course in life and especially to our improvement. Instead, we have to try for it to be perceived as an opportunity, through which the person will be able to re-evaluate his course so far, his certainties, as well as the functionality of his criteria. Thus, as our world becomes more homogenous and as global threats touch the status of each human person, it becomes an inescapable need for our mentality to increasingly integrate the meaning and practice of care within it. But how can the egocentric

and frightened contemporary man get out of the entrenchment of his microcosm and look a little further?

In the twentieth century, two Christian Orthodox saints, St. Silouan the Athonite (1866-1938) and St. Sophronius of Essex (1896-1993), developed their teaching based on the saying: „*Keep your mind in Hades² and do not despair.*“ What they wanted to say was that man should be aware of his perishability, but without this defeating him; but, on the contrary, helping him to make it a cause of his life's sanctification. We believe, therefore, that the two privileged limit points, which we proposed above, the limit of transcendence and the limit of fragility, correspond to the proposition of the two saints, so that one can look at life in a way that is creative for oneself and beneficial for him and for those around him.

We believe, therefore, that the combination of these limits can untie man from the shackles of arrogance, which feeds excessive confidence in his achievements. More specifically, he can use the wonderful achievements of his intellect and dexterity, not to become stronger or more individualistic – but instead, to be able to become even more compassionate for the other's misfortunes and show a greater understanding of his position. After all, a culture that does not develop its moral quality to the same degree as its technological capabilities, becomes „a giant with clay feet“, that is, it is in danger of collapsing at any moment under the weight of its power.

The sense of transcendence transports man from the concern of competitiveness, the stress of everyday life and the short-sighted gaze of temporary worldliness, bringing him in the view of eternity, in the vision of the Kingdom of God. Man recognizes the presence of mystery in his life; he feels that he cannot understand the full meaning of what is happening around him. Without ignoring and rejecting reason's value, he recognizes his interpretive limits. He accepts that there are facts and causes that go beyond what is directly comprehensible to him; they do not throw him into some horse superstition or paralyze his energy, but they touch him in the inner depths of his existence and aid him in finding meaning in his life. The experience of this transcendence opens man to the horizons of eternity and puts him on a trajectory of encounter with himself and God (Magatti, 2020, 3).

2 That is, the world of dead.

On the other hand, the limit of fragility has to do with human *relationality*. For Christian teaching, man is a unique person, unrepeatable and endowed with a special ability to relate to his fellow man. The value of this possibility becomes apparent especially when it goes beyond the level of necessity, either of the biological or of the psychological context that surrounds the notion of interest. In other words, we can experience the depth of our humanity when we go beyond the narrow limits of ourselves, when we open ourselves to the other person and especially when we serve those people who are not „ours“, those who are not close to us, those who we do not have absolutely nothing to expect from them. They are “the least” of our brothers, the “strangers” or the “enemies”; they are the ones Jesus tells us about in the “Judgment of the Nations” (*Matt.* 25:31-46) and the Parable of the Good Samaritan (*Luk.* 10:25-37), respectively. They are the ones who suffer, whom under other circumstances we would not admit to devoting a single glance to. But in order to just turn around and look at them, we must first realize that we simply could be in their place. That nothing guarantees us that we will always remain full, healthy, physically intact, safe and with many possibilities in front of us. History, moreover, has given us many examples of the „reversal“ of entire societies’ daily life.

In these terms, the fragile other is constantly a challenge to unlimited trust in human power. In this sense, too, modern anthropocentric surplus, as fed and flattered by our technological possibilities, tends to trap and stifle social life. But the sense of fragility, as a central component of *conditio humana*, strengthens man in the limit moments of his being; man can recognize the wounds of his existence, manage them and thus find his personal answers within them. In other words, by building a culture of care he is freed from the dangers created by the illusions of his power and the limitations of his self-referentiality, along the course of himself. For, pretending to conquer death, man is perpetually trapped, like Sisyphus, in the paralysis of the fear of death. On the contrary, by opening up to God, to the other man and to the deeper dimensions of himself, he acquires life and excess of life (cf. *Jn.* 10:10). Allowing himself to be reborn through the giftedness and ecstasy of existence, man responds in a specific way to the challenges of his earthly life (Magatti, 2020, 3). The evil that threatens and surrounds him becomes an occasion for the „more human“ to come out through the misery of life’s

circumstances. He thus answers the unresolved question of theodicy through his ministry – just as Christ answered the other great question, that of Pontius Pilate („what is truth?“) with his Crucifixion and Resurrection.

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