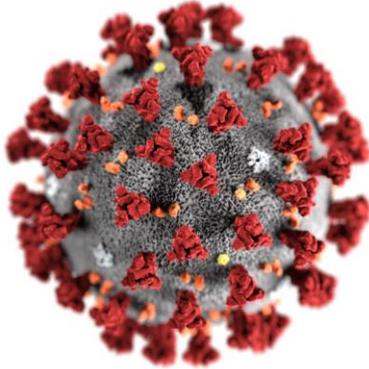


Saint Leo the Great - Lenten Parish Retreat  
Reflection III. March 27, 2020

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I think there is a middle ground to the way that people are responding to the COVID-19 virus pandemic that has struck the world. For some this pandemic would seem to be the very end of the world while for others merely a blip in time and we will soon return to life as normal again. Yet I think that somewhere in between is found something closer to reality. We have been considering in the first two reflections the need for us to 'look back' and examine



where we've been in our own individual lives and the wisdom in that in as much as it enables us to recognize what is good and noble about them and what needs to change and conform, not to the standard of the world but to the everlasting, sterling standard of God and His Kingdom. Perhaps there is no greater need right now than to address from a biblical, theological point the things that are taking place in the world around us. Just as this crisis has brought out the best and the worst in people, (as they always do), this should also be a time when the Christian who has been weekly (Sunday Mass) schooled in the things of the Kingdom, if we have had ears to hear, cannot but help see the shadow of the hand of God in all these events.

We humans in so many ways have become a wicked, sinful people. Like no other age before have we shunned and even mocked Almighty God.

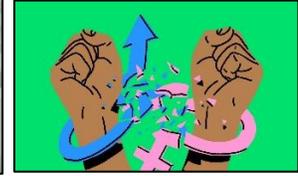
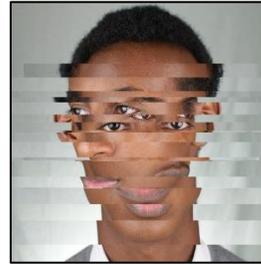
Throughout history when plagues, pandemics and disasters have fallen upon the people, people would see what is taking place as a scourge from God, a punishment or a chastisement. How often have you heard in the media's wall-to-wall coverage of the Coronavirus have you heard anything about the mention of God? You haven't. There most certainly has been gloom and doom predictions and 'experts' criticisms of how it is being handled by world leaders, but nothing about 'we pray...'. That's because the coverage is completely secular, this world. While there may be the rare exceptions with a reporter or commentator themselves having faith and being given the license to share their own opinion on the matter, we haven't heard or seen it. Some believe that this will all soon blow over and life as we knew it will return to 'normal'. But will it? Should it?

If our retreat is to now turn from the past and receiving the mercy and forgiveness of God in sacramental confession, (which is now not available to the faithful with the closing of churches – see what you can do if you can't go to confession to a priest at the end of today's reflection) to the present and our place this day living in the world and before God, we have to look to the world in which we are living.

First, when looking at the word 'world' we must recognize that Jesus used the word in two different senses and responded to it in two different ways as well. In one way, (John 3:16), we see that the world is good: **"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."** In this sense, the world God created is good because He has redeemed it, saved it through the Death of His Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ. Yet the world is also a small 's' spirit that is void of God. We know this as worldliness and the world without God. And to this sense of the world John's Gospel says, **"He was in the world and the world was created by Him (good sense of the word) but the world did not recognize Him"**. <sup>(John 1:10)</sup> The 'world' at the end of that quote (in bold) is life without God or humanity that has refused God. This, of course, is nothing new. All of salvation history has seen covenant after covenant that God has made with His people and in every case God has been faithful and we humans have not. And all of the covenants between man and God have come to an abrupt stop in the final covenant, known as the *New Covenant* made in Jesus. There will be no other covenants made between God and the people of the earth, the world. Jesus, the Son of God, is the last covenant.

So let's step back and take a look at the world we are living in; the world in this sense being void of Christ. Admittedly, this is the honest view that will lead some to stand up in churches during the homily and walk out. This is the talk that will lead some Catholics and other Christians to look for another church to attend. This is the calling out of

those things that are evil, sinful and contrary to God but are entirely acceptable to those, Christian or otherwise, who live according to the standard of this world and not the standard of Christ.



We have in short order legalized the killing of the unborn in the womb as recent years have called women to even “shout out their abortions” with great pride as innocence is murdered at a staggering rate of 125,000 abortions per day, which is 40-50 million children per year! (No, I haven’t got the stats wrong. Look it up!) Look at how many Catholics and Catholic politicians there are the world over who not only are in favour of abortion but freely and openly speak about it as a woman’s right. Oh, sure, it’s most often not named for what it is – murder, the taking of innocent, defenseless human life – but is spoken of as a ‘woman’s right to choose’ and ‘reproductive rights’. All the while it is nothing less than the purposeful, intentional murder of God’s children. The science is clearly on the prolife side as modern technology has enabled us to see and hear what is going on in the womb, when the heart begins to beat and what the child looks like. In Canada, the most recent *Pew Research* poll (Pew, 2018) states that 55% of the population identify themselves as ‘Christian’, with 29% being Catholic and 18% identifying as Protestant. With a Christian majority in this country, how is it possible that we haven’t been able to abolish abortion in our land? Indifference, ignorance or separation from Christ and the Church are obvious reasons or we don’t want to ‘impose’ our views on others. And some Christians have so distanced themselves from Christ and the Holy Spirit He gave them that they are unable to see and understand that Jesus Christ, the Creator and Author of life itself, is prolife. One abortion doctor, Dr. Bernard Nathanson, who was in 1970 the director of what he called “the largest abortion clinic in the Western world” and was a leading promoter of abortion in the U.S., eventually became a voice for the unborn as he entirely switched from the pro-abortion side. By 1974 Dr. Nathanson was having serious second thoughts about his pro-abortion stance, stating, “I am deeply troubled by my own increasing certainty that I had in fact presided over 60,000 deaths.” After his own eventual conversion which led him from being an abortionist to prolife, Dr. Nathanson became famous for producing a 28-minute film called “*The Silent Scream*” which you can find and watch on Youtube. Dr. Nathanson died in 2011 shortly after converting to Catholicism. Abortion has always been and remains among us as the personal, intended affront to God’s creating hand in the gift of life, period. It is and will always be the murder of our children.

Euthanasia, a seldom heard word up until the past five or more years has become legalized more and more in many countries around the earth and Canada made it legal here just four years ago. Now our Government wants to expand doctor-assisted-suicide in new legislation that would allow the disabled to receive it and those who can’t speak for themselves can have it done to them by another who requests it for them. And it would even allow for a person to receive death by a doctor on the very day they request it. Doctors formerly worked to save life, not take it.

We have seen in short order the definitions of personhood, gender, marriage and family changed from what it always has been understood as within and outside of religion and generally in every age and culture. If you oppose these changes (so-called progresses) you are deemed a hater as are many other labels applied to those who does not acquiesce to the ever-changing and lowering standard of the world. But that world is an orb without God. We say that we will decide for ourselves. If God gives life and we take it, what will God give us?



All the while.... the world and most Christians have slept. And many of those who haven't totally fallen asleep are confused, to say the least. People aren't sure where to turn amidst the many voices of the 'world' and so they listen to the television programs, the comedians, those on social media instead of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the timeless, eternal and unchanging teachings of the Church which are one and the same with the teachings of Christ, for Christ said to the Church at its founding in Him, *"Whoever listens to you listens to me; whoever rejects you rejects me. And whoever rejects me rejects the One who sent me."* (Luke 10:16)

*"Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith."* (Gal. 6:7-10)

Earlier this afternoon, Pope Francis delivered what is called an *Urbi et Orbi* message and blessing to the world from the outside front steps of St. Peter's Basilica while soft rain came down, perhaps not so much as a benediction of blessing from the Lord but a tearful lament on our times, our sin and waywardness. One thinks of Jesus crying over Jerusalem in his prediction of its fall: *"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to you! How often I have longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would have none of it!"* (Luke 13:34)

The Holy Father, Pope Francis said,

*"How many people every day are exercising patience and offering hope, taking care to sow not panic but a shared responsibility. How many fathers, mothers, grandparents and teachers are showing our children, in small everyday gestures, how to face up to and navigate a crisis by adjusting their routines, lifting their gaze and fostering prayer. How many are praying, offering and interceding for the good of all. Prayer and quiet service: these are our victorious weapons."* The Pope is here making it clear that these are standards within Catholic faith and beyond which ought to raise young minds to know and love God, especially in the midst of a crisis, as other generations before us have done.

Pope Francis also stated our present condition in the world:

*"The storm exposes our vulnerability and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities. It shows us how we have allowed to become dull and feeble – the very things that nourish, sustain and strengthen our lives and our communities. The tempest lays bare all our prepackaged ideas and forgetfulness of what nourishes our people's souls; all those attempts that anesthetize us with ways of thinking and acting that supposedly "save" us, but instead prove incapable of putting us in touch with our roots and keeping alive the memory of those who have gone before us. We deprive ourselves of the antibodies we need to confront adversity."*

In short, we not only need to change but as the world, as the Church, we must! It's tough enough that we are Canadians who already have a reputation as being polite and even apologetic let alone being a Catholic Canadian who doesn't want to rock the boat, appear out of step or who remains indifferent to all that is going on around us.

This pandemic has been rightly named a crisis but it is so where Catholics and all who want to get serious about living for Jesus and the Kingdom He has revealed, are being called to "wake up" and "choose".

The Holy Father continued:

*"Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" Lord, your word this evening strikes us and regards us, all of us. In this world, that you love more than we do, we have gone ahead at breakneck speed, feeling powerful and able to do anything. Greedy for profit, we let ourselves get caught up in things, and lured away by haste. We did not stop at*

*your reproach to us, we were not shaken awake by wars or injustice across the world, nor did we listen to the cry of the poor or of our ailing planet. We carried on regardless, thinking we would stay healthy in a world that was sick. Now that we are in a stormy sea, we implore you: "Wake up, Lord!"*

Our world and us who are in it are being given a powerful, unprecedented to our own times, sign that we are not in charge and that God alone is all-powerful. It is a call to remember that God is God and we aren't God. All of the popes of the last century have spoken about that which shall come upon the world and St. John Paul II, just prior to his election as Roman Pontiff, remarked to gathered American bishops in 1977, that we are a *Culture of Death*.

In our present moment, God is calling us to be a Catholic people with a backbone, with courage, with wisdom and with a voice which speaks out against the 'Culture of Death'. Everything that happens to us passes first through the hands of God. This pandemic has not been caused by God but allowed by Him that we should wake up. Jesus would not be pleased but stern with us over what we have allowed to exist in the world destroying minds, children, families, marriages, relationships and lives. Let us personally resolve to set out our course in a renewed sense to really, really follow Jesus, making time and priority for personal prayer, the Rosary, solid Catholic reading, movies and programs that will feed our minds and give us a desire for more. Let us, as Easter draws near in this surreal time when we likely won't even be able to celebrate the Resurrection of Christ as a parish family, prepare now to celebrate the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ who came, who comes and who will come again at an hour we do not know. Let us not be cowardly, but people of renewed and renewing faith in Jesus.

God love you.

Fr. Charles

#### **SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION DURING THE PANDEMIC**

*(from the Archbishop of Toronto, March 25)*

"The only ordinary way of attaining forgiveness for sins is participating in individual and integral confession and absolution. Nevertheless, if a person is unable to make an appointment with a priest for the Sacrament during the current pandemic, it will suffice for the moment to pray the **Act of Contrition** as best as one can intending it truthfully, and to commit to participating in the Sacrament of Reconciliation as soon as possible when conditions allow."

*(Below is the full text of Pope Francis' address during the extraordinary **Urbi et Orbi** blessing he delivered while praying for an end of the coronavirus. It was delivered today, in Rome, on Friday, March 27, 2020 at 1:00 pm., our time.)*

*The Gospel passage of Mark 4:35-40 was read:*

**O**n that day, when evening came, Jesus said to his disciples,  
"Let's go across to the other side of the lake."  
So after leaving the crowd, they took him along, just as he was,  
in the boat, and other boats were with him.  
Now a great windstorm developed and the waves were breaking into the boat,  
so that the boat was nearly swamped.  
But he was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion.  
They woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, don't you care that we are about to die?"  
So he got up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Be quiet! Calm down!"  
Then the wind stopped, and it was dead calm.  
And he said to them, "Why are you cowardly? Do you still not have faith?"

*Then the Holy Father delivered the following homily:*

“When evening had come” (Mk 4:35). The Gospel passage we have just heard begins like this. For weeks now it has been evening. Thick darkness has gathered over our squares, our streets and our cities; it has taken over our lives, filling everything with a deafening silence and a distressing void, that stops everything as it passes by; we feel it in the air, we notice in people’s gestures, their glances give them away. We find ourselves afraid and lost. Like the disciples in the Gospel we were caught off guard by an unexpected, turbulent storm. We have realized that we are on the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented, but at the same time important and needed, all of us called to row together, each of us in need of comforting the other. On this boat... are all of us. Just like those disciples, who spoke anxiously with one voice, saying “We are perishing” (v. 38), so we too have realized that we cannot go on thinking of ourselves, but only together can we do this.

It is easy to recognize ourselves in this story. What is harder to understand is Jesus’ attitude. While his disciples are quite naturally alarmed and desperate, he stands in the stern, in the part of the boat that sinks first. And what does he do? In spite of the tempest, he sleeps soundly, trusting in the Father; this is the only time in the Gospels we see Jesus sleeping. When he wakes up, after calming the wind and the waters, he turns to the disciples in a reproaching voice: “Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?” (v. 40).

Let us try to understand. In what does the lack of the disciples’ faith consist, as contrasted with Jesus’ trust? They had not stopped believing in him; in fact, they called on him. But we see how they call on him: “Teacher, do you not care if we perish?” (v. 38). *Do you not care*: they think that Jesus is not interested in them, does not care about them. One of the things that hurts us and our families most when we hear it said is: “Do you not care about me?” It is a phrase that wounds and unleashes storms in our hearts. It would have shaken Jesus too. Because he, more than anyone, cares about us. Indeed, once they have called on him, he saves his disciples from their discouragement.

The storm exposes our vulnerability and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities. It shows us how we have allowed to become dull and feeble – the very things that nourish, sustain and strengthen our lives and our communities. The tempest lays bare all our prepackaged ideas and forgetfulness of what nourishes our people’s souls; all those attempts that anesthetize us with ways of thinking and acting that supposedly “save” us, but instead prove incapable of putting us in touch with our roots and keeping alive the memory of those who have gone before us. We deprive ourselves of the antibodies we need to confront adversity.

In this storm, the façade of those stereotypes with which we camouflaged our egos, always worrying about our image, has fallen away, uncovering once more that (blessed) common belonging, of which we cannot be deprived: our belonging as brothers and sisters.

*Like the disciples, we will experience that with him on board there will be no shipwreck. Because this is God’s strength: turning to the good everything that happens to us, even the bad things. He brings serenity into our storms, because with God life never dies.*

“Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?” Lord, your word this evening strikes us and regards us, all of us. In this world, that you love more than we do, we have gone ahead at breakneck speed, feeling powerful and able to do anything. Greedy for profit, we let ourselves get caught up in things, and lured away by haste. We did not stop at your reproach to us, we were not shaken awake by wars or injustice across the world, nor did we listen to the cry of the poor or of our ailing planet. We carried on regardless, thinking we would stay healthy in a world that was sick. Now that we are in a stormy sea, we implore you: “Wake up, Lord!”.

“Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?” Lord, you are calling to us, calling us to faith. Which is not so much believing that you exist, but coming to you and trusting in you. This Lent your call reverberates urgently: “Be converted!”, “Return to me with all your heart” (Joel 2:12). You are calling on us to seize this time of trial as a time of *choosing*. It is not the time of your judgement, but of our judgement: a time to choose what matters and what

passes away, a time to separate what is necessary from what is not. It is a time to get our lives back on track with regard to you, Lord, and to others. We can look to so many exemplary companions for the journey, who, even though fearful, have reacted by giving their lives. This is the force of the Spirit poured out and fashioned in courageous and generous self-denial. It is the life in the Spirit that can redeem, value and demonstrate how our lives are woven together and sustained by ordinary people – often forgotten people – who do not appear in newspaper and magazine headlines nor on the grand catwalks of the latest show, but who without any doubt are in these very days writing the decisive events of our time: doctors, nurses, supermarket employees, cleaners, caregivers, providers of transport, law and order forces, volunteers, priests, religious men and women and so very many others who have understood that no one reaches salvation by themselves. In the face of so much suffering, where the authentic development of our peoples is assessed, we experience the priestly prayer of Jesus: “That they may all be one” (Jn 17:21). How many people every day are exercising patience and offering hope, taking care to sow not panic but a shared responsibility. How many fathers, mothers, grandparents and teachers are showing our children, in small everyday gestures, how to face up to and navigate a crisis by adjusting their routines, lifting their gaze and fostering prayer. How many are praying, offering and interceding for the good of all. Prayer and quiet service: these are our victorious weapons.

*“Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?”* Faith begins when we realise we are in need of salvation. We are not self-sufficient; by ourselves we founder: we need the Lord, like ancient navigators needed the stars. Let us invite Jesus into the boats of our lives. Let us hand over our fears to him so that he can conquer them. Like the disciples, we will experience that with him on board there will be no shipwreck. Because this is God’s strength: turning to the good everything that happens to us, even the bad things. He brings serenity into our storms, because with God life never dies.

The Lord asks us and, in the midst of our tempest, invites us to reawaken and put into practice that solidarity and hope capable of giving strength, support and meaning to these hours when everything seems to be floundering. The Lord awakens so as to reawaken and revive our Easter faith. We have an anchor: by his cross we have been saved. We have a rudder: by his cross we have been redeemed. We have a hope: by his cross we have been healed and embraced so that nothing and no one can separate us from his redeeming love. In the midst of isolation when we are suffering from a lack of tenderness and chances to meet up, and we experience the loss of so many things, let us once again listen to the proclamation that saves us: he is risen and is living by our side. The Lord asks us from his cross to rediscover the life that awaits us, to look towards those who look to us, to strengthen, recognize and foster the grace that lives within us. Let us not quench the wavering flame (cf. Is 42:3) that never falters, and let us allow hope to be rekindled.

*The Lord awakens so as to reawaken and revive our Easter faith.*

Embracing his cross means finding the courage to embrace all the hardships of the present time, abandoning for a moment our eagerness for power and possessions in order to make room for the creativity that only the Spirit is capable of inspiring. It means finding the courage to create spaces where everyone can recognize that they are called, and to allow new forms of hospitality, fraternity and solidarity. By his cross we have been saved in order to embrace hope and let it strengthen and sustain all measures and all possible avenues for helping us protect ourselves and others. Embracing the Lord in order to embrace hope: that is the strength of faith, which frees us from fear and gives us hope.

*“Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?”*

Dear brothers and sisters, from this place that tells of Peter’s rock-solid faith, I would like this evening to entrust all of you to the Lord, through the intercession of Mary, Health of the People and Star of the stormy Sea. From this colonnade that embraces Rome and the whole world, may God’s blessing come down upon you as a consoling embrace. Lord, may you bless the world, give health to our bodies and comfort our hearts. You ask us not to be afraid. Yet our faith is weak and we are fearful. But you, Lord, will not leave us at the mercy of the storm. Tell us again: “Do not be afraid” (Mt 28:5). And we, together with Peter, “cast all our anxieties onto you, for you care about us” (cf. 1 Pet 5:7).

*(Pope Francis – Urbi et Orbi message and blessing Friday, March 27, 1:00pm ET)*