

## 2021 Bishop Otsuka's New Year Letter

### Protect All Life, II Living Faith in the Corona Era

#### Introduction

We pray for an end the new coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic that began last March and struggle to find a balance between infection prevention and social life. Many of us who have experienced restrictions have seen the rhythms of our lives change along with our goals and plans. But while we are experiencing negative feelings, I think we are also noticing changes in our hearts over time. We might not be able to put it into words, but we have taken a new look at ourselves and the meaning and purpose of our lives. The cancellation of Masses has disturbed us Catholics, but also has caused us to reexamine our faith life. We Christians try to accept the reality of the pandemic's woes in faith while continuing to act to "protect all life" (the theme of last year's visit to Japan by Pope Francis). At the same time, we look deeply into our faith to see what it means to live in the Corona Era.<sup>1</sup>

#### 1. **Quiet conversation with God**

While fulfilling our daily duties we are distracted by repetitive daily routines and cannot easily face the spiritual thirst in our hearts. Therefore, especially in the middle of this crisis, we must set aside quiet time to talk with God. "For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall never be shaken." (Psalm 62:1-2). Mother Teresa had this to say about silence: "We need to find God, and he cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence...The essential thing is not what we say, but what God says to us and through us."<sup>2</sup>

One step in deepening our faith is to recognize that we need salvation. We cannot satisfy our thirst on our own. I cannot save myself. Let us ask deep inside our hearts whether the way we live now is enough. "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me and lead me in the way everlasting." (Ps 139:23-24).

## 2. **Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?**

In March of last year, Pope Francis invited us who fear the pandemic to meditate on the words of Jesus challenging his disciples when he calmed the storm: “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” (Mark 4:40). Without trust in God, we are at the mercy of fear and anxiety. In the story of Jesus walking on the lake in a storm, Peter says, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” (Matthew 14:28). Peter did not primarily seek any special power to walk on water. He believed in the power of Jesus.

However, as soon as he got off the boat and started walking on the water, he noticed the strong wind, became scared and began to sink. We are like Peter when we panic in this pandemic and take our eyes off the Lord Jesus. But when you think about it, the fact that we Christians live believing in the power of God's salvation is as amazing an everyday miracle as walking on water. We must not forget to trust in the Lord and live through Christ, with Christ and in Christ rather than being frightened by the coronavirus. “Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act.” (Psalm 37:5). We believe in the Lord's plan.

## 3. **Asking the meaning of life in the Corona Era**

March 11 will be the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Great East Japan Earthquake. Many people lost their lives and the suffering of those who were affected continues. In recent years, earthquakes, typhoons and heavy rains have occurred frequently, and even though they are natural disasters, when faced with the loss of human life and property in an instant people ask about the meaning of such absurd events that cannot be explained away as bad luck. This corona crisis is a major turning point in human history that has led to our time being called the Corona Era. Everyone wonders why if there is a God, the horrific things that strike humanity happen, and why God allows such things.

The Bible tells the story of the People of Israel as a history of salvation. It teaches that the history of salvation initiated by God, the creator of heaven and earth, is God's plan, and that it has a reason. We see that the many hardships that struck God's people were intended by God to give the people an opportunity for conversion and to seek God wholeheartedly. Jesus told the Parable of the Weeds in the Wheat (Matthew 13:24-30), teaching that no one can know the whole of God's plan and therefore must not interfere with it. This is because God's thoughts are hidden in things that seem absurd to us. We must not jump to conclusions about the meaning of the corona pandemic, but it is important to ask with the eyes of faith what it means for us to be alive in this era. The Lord is saying to us in this storm: Wake up and realize what is important.

#### 4. **Participating in the Passion of Christ through suffering**

Pope Benedict XVI says that suffering is a part of life and that only God can remove the power of evil and sin that are the source of suffering and thus create healing hope.<sup>3</sup> Benedict was asked by a seven-year-old girl named Elena who was affected by the Great East Japan Earthquake why she had to be so scared. Benedict told her that he did not know either, but he did know three things. The first is that God is with us. Even if we cannot find the answer and are in sadness, God is by our side. The second is that many people around the world support us. And the third is that one day we will understand that this suffering was not meaningless or in vain, but that there is a plan of mercy and love behind it.

St. Paul says that despite enduring unbearable sufferings throughout his life he can comfort those in distress based on his own experience of finding comfort from God (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). That was because he saw the suffering as not personal, but as the suffering of Christ in him. Especially in this corona disaster, Christ himself is suffering among us. In our prayers for one another, let us also unite with the many people who are suffering, join in the Passion of Christ, and receive the power to endure. (2 Corinthians 1:6).

#### 5. **From the sacrament we receive to the sacrament we live**

Having experienced the trial of Mass cancellations, we ponder what it means to be nourished by the Eucharist. At the Last Supper Jesus instituted the Sacrament of the Eucharist and commanded, "Do this in remembrance of me." (1 Corinthians 11:24). After washing the feet of the disciples, he ordered them, "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." (John 13:14-15). The first command to "remember" is related to the liturgy, and the second command to "wash one another's feet" is related to the deeds of love. Mother Teresa said she went to communion twice a day. The first was at the morning Mass, and the second was Jesus whom she received among the people she met during the day. For her, the sacrament of the Eucharist was firmly associated with the practice of love for neighbors, something she lived fully.

The liturgy, especially the Mass, is said to be the source and summit of the entire Christian life.<sup>4</sup> Our daily life can be said to be the time spent between celebrations of this source and summit. Now is the time to live the sacramental grace of love of neighbor. The Christians of Japan who had been in hiding during 250 years of persecution successfully passed on their faith through prayer and the practice of love even though

they could not receive any of the seven sacraments except baptism. Through the experience of Mass cancellations, we should learn that the desire to live intimate fellowship with God and other people builds a Christian community as much as the visible activity of gathering in a church does. This is how we can fulfill the role Pope Francis has set for the church to be a “field hospital” in society.

## **6. With hope and joy**

Only by having hope in the future can a person perceive the present time as meaningful and live with enthusiasm. By believing in tomorrow we can live today. Even in this situation where we cannot see the complete end of the corona plague, we must remember the virtue of hope, believing in God's plan. We cannot immediately grasp the meaning of suffering. The person who suffers even while calling upon God needs time to discover the significance of suffering. The hope of Christians comes from the belief that whether at the beginning of our suffering or even during it God will give us comfort and the power to endure. And each time we overcome suffering our Christian faith grows stronger.

The virtue of hope absorbs the various hopes that energize human behavior, protects us from disappointment, and supports us when we seem abandoned.<sup>5</sup> Christ calls upon us to “Abide in me” (John 15:4) and promises to complete our joy with his own joy (John 15:11). Therefore, based on his own experience of hardship, Paul can dare to recommend to people, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). The joy of faith does not mean that hardships and sorrows disappear. It is a joyful relief that comes from being united with God. Rather than being frightened by the corona threat, we want to arouse and put to work the power to rejoice amid hardship that Christ promises.

## **7. Sadness that suits God's will**

St. Paul says there are two kinds of sorrow. “For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death.” (2 Corinthians 7:10). If a person is converted by the experience of sadness and suffering and steps from a self-centered way of life in the direction that God desires, it is sadness that is God's will and brings the joy of salvation. If instead we refuse to accept suffering and only complain, the suffering goes no further, remains mere suffering, drives us into endless suffering, a lifelong world of regret. It does not lead to eternal life. From a divine point of view, the corona disaster must be the gateway to yet-unknown blessings.

Even when Paul encountered repeated hardships, he was able to say, “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.” (2 Corinthians 4:8-9). The Letter to the Hebrews encourages us as well. “Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.” (Hebrews 12:11 ).

## 8. **A new lifestyle**

The basis of Pope Francis's thought is that "everything is connected." In this corona disaster individuals and communities are entrusted by the Creator to deepen the ecological conversion that the pope calls for, to review lifestyles and daily behavior, and to sow seeds of beauty for the next generation. We must take this mission seriously. Pope Francis calls upon us. “The Lord questions us from the cross, challenging us to rethink our lives and to look at those who need us, to deepen the grace living in us. He asks us to accept it with gratitude and make use of it.” (*Life after the Pandemic*, page 30). Since it is a new lifestyle, a “new normal,” it will not be possible to seek the same standard of living as before. In the Corona Era, it is necessary not just to prevent infection, but to have the courage to live a simpler and more human life. (*Life*··, page 57). Let us think again about what we really need in our life, not only in money, but also in time, food, clothing, housing, leisure, etc. Jesus taught us trust in the Father who knows what we need, without worrying about tomorrow. (Matthew 6: 32-34). Let us think carefully about what is most important for us to live a rich life by living a lean life without luxury and then let us choose it.

## 9. **The antibody of hope, faith, and love**

By faith Christians can find meaning in their present lives, their purpose in life and the direction of the history of the world. This is because the basis of their hope in life lies beyond this world. Moreover, faith encourages us to evangelize society so that it lives for others in this world. Therefore, no matter what difficulties we face we accept reality, believing in Christ's promise to free us from evil and death. Thus, we overcome various social challenges with the power of love.

Pope Francis has said. “I realized that the corona infection has caused all humanity to be in the same boat. Everyone is weak and confused, but at the same time, each one is important and irreplaceable, and everyone is invited to become one and provide mutual comfort. We are all together in this boat.” (*Life*··, page 25). Therefore, as "all things work together for good" (Romans 8:28), we will share life as dwellers on the earth.

The challenge is to unite the entire human family and pursue the sustainable and holistic development for which the pope calls, becoming a people with “antibodies of hope, faith and love.” (*Life*··, page 56).

#### 10. **The essential antibody of justice, love, and solidarity**

Starting from the idea that there is a source of infection, there is a tendency to treat infected persons as if they were criminals. As anxiety and fear spread among people there is a danger that prejudice, and discrimination will spread. More than ever, action to protect all life requires solidarity and compassion in society. Rather than restoring the pre-pandemic state, humanity must show more solidarity than ever before and build a society centered on the most vulnerable. Pope Francis has said, “To share the suffering of the Lord requires that we be close to the suffering of our brothers and sisters.” (*Life*··, page 53). It is argued that refugees around the world and others who have been abandoned for some time are in a state of emergency, forced into more difficult and dangerous situations by the corona pandemic. What we need is “the essential antibody of justice, love, and solidarity.” (*Life*··, page 57).

We have the power to suffer the pain of others as our own. There are many people around us who help each other during business closures and self-isolation. We must eliminate the egoism that concerns itself solely with the safety and security of oneself and one's own country and cooperate with everyone. We all want to hold hands, share pain, be close to vulnerable people, help each other, defer to each other, accept new lifestyles, and live together. Life together is the spirituality of the Corona Era.

#### 11. **Rekindle the flame of love**

We Christians do not seek faith so we can escape from this unusual corona disaster situation. It is precisely because we have been placed in this Corona Era that we continually strive to practice true love of neighbor and seek a new way of life that protects the lives of all humankind. By fully living through this Corona Era in this way, we can experience the mystery of timeless unchanging faith and deepen our individual belief.

St. Paul tells Timothy: “For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.” (2 Timothy 1:6-7). My salvation and the salvation of all humankind are connected. Through the Holy Spirit we can discover our mission and role for the salvation of all. “For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy

Spirit. The one who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and has human approval. Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.” (Romans 14:17-19). It is for this reason that we have received the Holy Spirit.

## 12. **Mary, comfort of the sorrowful**

The Blessed Mother stood below the cross of Jesus. Just as Jesus endured the suffering of the cross for the salvation of all people, Mary suffered throughout her life and participated in God's work of salvation. It was the fulfillment of Simeon's prophecy that "a sword will pierce your own soul too." Let us pray to Mary who is with Christ suffering in the corona plagued human race. “Mary, Mother of God and our mother, in these harsh days of suffering and anxiety all over the world, we ask for your protection and help. Look upon us with mercy in this new coronavirus pandemic. Comfort of those who suffer, embrace all your suffering children. Pray for us that God will reach out to all and save us from the outbreak of this terrifying disease. Amen.” (*Life...*, pages 74-79).

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Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God

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<sup>1</sup> Please see the “Senses of Faith” in my 2013 New Year’s Letter: (1) A Personal Sense of Faith, (2) A Discovering Sense of Faith, (3) A Perceptive Sense of Faith, (4) A Christological Sense of Faith, (5) A Sacramental Sense of Faith, (6) A Practical Sense of Faith, (7) A Salvific Sense of Faith, (8) A Integral Sense of Faith, (9) A Critical sense of Faith, (10) A Community Sense of Faith, (11) A Spirit-filled Sense of Faith, (12) A Marian Sense of Faith.

See also Pope Francis, *Life after the Pandemic*, a collection of eight messages regarding the pandemic. Translations and page references in this letter are from the Japanese edition.

<sup>2</sup> See Hiroshi Katayanagi, 「聖なる者となりなさい マザー・テレサの生き方」(Be holy: the life of Mother Teresa)、published by Don Bosco Sha, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> See Benedict XVI, encyclical *Spe Salvi* (In hope we are cured), 35-40.

<sup>4</sup> Vatican 2, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 10.

<sup>5</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1817-1821.