



DICASTERY FOR PROMOTING
INTEGRAL HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

IN THE MIDST OF COVID-19 DEATHS, *THERE IS HOPE IN GRIEF!*

A DSSUI CONTRIBUTION

The Church celebrates the Solemnity of Corpus Christi each year as a remembrance of the great gift of the Eucharist, and each day embraces the Pascal Mystery anew with every celebration of the Holy Mass. Even as Christ was experiencing betrayal and abandonment, he generously offered his body and blood to the disciples in the Upper Room and surrendered himself in love for us on the cross. Before the eyes of those who loved him most, his precious body was taken away and buried hastily in an unknown grave. They could not offer him a proper burial. The Gospels describe plainly the sorrow and pain of Christ's disciples in those distressing days.

The global pandemic has abruptly swept up countless persons, young and old, into the sorrowful mysteries of life. Social distancing measures, effective and necessary for preventing the spread of contagion, have also made it difficult or impossible for families and loved ones to accompany the sick and the dying. Our dear ones struggle for life in isolation, taken away suddenly before we can accompany them with an embrace, a caress or even a word of love. Funeral rites, so essential for those who are left behind, are simplified or delayed. Human touch, sacred rites and the sacramental life have been put on hold, but the pain and sorrow remains. "How many tears are shed every second in our world; each is different but together they form, as it were, an ocean of desolation that cries out for mercy, compassion and consolation" (*Pope Francis, Extraordinary Jubilee for Mercy, "Prayer Vigil to Dry the Tears," 5 May 2016*).

In these days we have all been brought low before a complex reality that we cannot control or remove, all the while yearning for the mercy and divine assistance that will bring us once again to the path of peace. "This is our poverty," Pope Francis reminds us, "but also our grandeur: to plead for the consolation of God, who in his tenderness comes to wipe the tears from our eyes" (*Francis, "Prayer Vigil to Dry the Tears"*). We are never alone in our difficulties, never truly isolated in our sorrow and grief. God is always with us, and the glorious mysteries of the resurrected Christ remind us that sickness and death will never have the last word for those who trust in God. The resurrection, "is the victory of love over the root of evil, a victory that does not 'by-pass' suffering and death, but passes through them, opening a path in the abyss, transforming evil into good: this is the unique hallmark of the power of God" (*Pope Francis, "Urbi et Orbi" Easter Message, 12 April 2020*).

As a timely response to the current crisis, Pope Francis has asked the Dicastery for the Promotion of Integral Human Development to organize the COVID-19 Commission to address the immediate needs of this devastating illness. Central to this commission is to embrace both hope and the human family as we face this challenge together. The illness that has fallen upon the world has driven many persons apart and threatens the integral development of peoples on every continent, yet we never cease to hear the cry of the risen Christ, "Peace be with you!" (Jn 20:19). For those who

grieve the death of a loved one in this time, this promise is particularly poignant. “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 at our side” (*Pope Francis, Urbi et Orbi “Extraordinary Moment of Prayer,” 27 March 2020*).

This joyful proclamation resonates with us even in the midst of sorrow and pain. The women of Jerusalem, overwhelmed with grief over the death of Christ, came to the tomb while it was still dark. “They, like us,” says Pope Francis, “had before their eyes the drama of suffering, of an unexpected tragedy that happened all too suddenly. They had seen death and it weighed on their hearts” (*Pope Francis, Easter Vigil, 11 April 2020*). They could not have imagined, in that sad moment, that hope would ever dawn for them again or that they could somehow find it in the darkness. But hope found them! Christ appeared and his presence changed everything. God transforms even our sorrow and pain, and with the tenacity of hope He draws us into the mystery of the resurrection even now.

Our faith in the risen Christ brings hope, “and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rm 5:5). Charity, therefore, must be the fruit of hope. When we come to recognize the presence of God in the midst of sorrow and pain, hope has the power to inspire love that shows itself in deeds. This is a reality that should touch us all in these days of crisis, whether or not we have personally experienced the death of a loved one.

When Jesus encountered the grief of Martha and Mary at the death of their brother, Lazarus, he wept because he shared their sorrow and pain. “The tears of Jesus,” says Pope Francis, “serve as an antidote to my own indifference before the suffering of our brothers and sisters. His tears teach me to make my own the pain of others, to share in the discouragement and sufferings of those experiencing painful situations. They make me realize the sadness and desperation of those who have seen the body of a dear one taken from them, and who no longer have a place in which to find consolation” (*Pope Francis, Extraordinary Jubilee for Mercy, “Prayer Vigil to Dry the Tears,” 5 May 2016*).

Here is where we find the embrace of hope and the human family in a unique and effective way. The tears of Christ serve to inflame charity and our sincere desire to do good for others and support them in their time of need. We are never truly separated when we pray for each other, and when we allow our humble, everyday actions to be inspired by love for those who have experienced so much loss and pain in these difficult days. This is the moment for solidarity, for a living faith that shows itself in concern for others. Self-isolation is an important medical remedy, but it is a useless spiritual one. St. Paul reminds us that all the members of the Body of Christ “have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together” (1 Cor 12:25-26). There is always something we can do to help others, especially those who mourn.

Standing at the foot of the cross in the midst of the most sorrowful mystery of all was Mary, the mother of Jesus. In every age she has been a source of strength and consolation for those who have lost a loved one, and she never ceases to be a beacon of hope for those who experience darkness and distress. May Our Lady of Sorrows intercede for all who have lost a loved one in this challenging time, and may she continue to accompany us on our journey home to eternal life.