

Post Pandemic Life?

While ‘good riddance’ is likely the dominant attitude toward a year gone by in which a pandemic struck the whole planet and politics in our country were more toxic than we’ve ever seen in recent history, I wonder how wise it is to usher 2020 too quickly into our wake. It seems to me that terrible darkness has either fallen upon the earth or been drawn out of the shadows.

Epidemiologists suggest that, for as bad as this Coronavirus Pandemic has been, it could have been much worse. This particular virus is extremely contagious, but it is not as deadly as it might be. Given the predictions that as many as 560,000 people will have died from it renders this small consolation. But, can you imagine something on the scale of the Black Death of the Middle Ages, which is estimated to have killed between 75 and 200 million people in Europe and Asia? Take a moment to consider those horrific numbers. There were so many bodies, the smell of death left no doubt that this wasn’t “fake news.” [NB: The Black Death was not a virus but, rather, a bacterial infection.]

The incredible rate at which scientists have created vaccines to defend us against the current threat is a blessing and something one is tempted to call a ‘miracle.’ Nevertheless, we ought to be humbled by what has happened. I suggest this against the sentiment to simply dismiss the horrible old year and to plow forward into the new year with hopes of returning to some version of ‘normal.’ Is it possible that the old ‘normal’ needed to be changed? Maybe our senses of what constitutes ‘normal’ and ‘progress’ needed to be changed.

Perhaps the following excerpt from Pope Benedict’s Encyclical “Spe Salvi” could be of assistance for our discernment of how we might approach a new year:

On the one hand, we do not want to die; above all, those who love us do not want us to die. Yet on the other hand, neither do we want to continue living indefinitely, nor was the earth created with that in view. So what do we really want? Our paradoxical attitude gives rise to a deeper question: what in fact is “life”? And what does “eternity” really mean?

In some way we want life itself, true life, untouched even by death; yet at the same time we do not know the thing towards which we feel driven. We cannot stop reaching out for it, and yet we know that all we can experience or accomplish is not what we yearn for. This unknown “thing” is the true “hope” which drives us, and at the same time the fact that it is unknown is the cause of all forms of despair and also of all efforts, whether positive or destructive, directed towards worldly authenticity and human authenticity. The term “eternal life” is intended to give a name to this known “unknown”. Inevitably it is an inadequate term that creates confusion.

“Eternal”, in fact, suggests to us the idea of something interminable, and this frightens us; “life” makes us think of the life that we know and love and do not want to lose, even though very often it brings more toil than satisfaction, so that while on the one hand we desire it, on the other hand we do not want it. To imagine ourselves outside the temporality that imprisons us and in some way to sense that eternity is not an unending succession of days in the calendar, but something more like the supreme moment of satisfaction, in which totality embraces us and we embrace totality—this we can only attempt. It would be like plunging into the ocean of infinite love, a moment in which time—the before and after—no longer exists. We can only attempt to grasp the idea that such a moment is life in the full sense, a plunging ever anew into the vastness of being, in which we are simply overwhelmed with joy.



If this absolute love exists, with its absolute certainty, then—only then—is man “redeemed”, whatever should happen to him in his particular circumstances. This is what it means to say: Jesus Christ has “redeemed” us. Through him we have become certain of God, a God who is not a remote “first cause” of the world, because his only-begotten Son has become man and of him everyone can say: “I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20).