



This Is Not Our First Rodeo

The following was recently written by a priest from Montana, Father Joseph Ponessa, who was a year behind Bishop Cary in the seminary.

This Easter the Catholics of the world are reeling from not being able to celebrate in the usual way. We know, however, that the Catholic Church has been around for a long time, and she and her children have endured many tribulations, among them the devastating cycles of plague. The Church is still here in part because she has good coping skills.

While Christianity was still a banned religion in the Roman Empire, while those who accepted baptism were subject to the death penalty, Christians distinguished themselves by fearlessly helping their neighbors during the Antonine Plague (165-180) and the Plague of Cyprian (249-271). These were viral outbreaks, probably smallpox. One of the reasons Christianity eventually became the official religion of the Empire was because the pagans fled from the plague, but the Christians ran towards it. The last pagan emperor, Julian the Apostate (362), rebuked the pagan priests for failing to display compassion like the Christians. So the first quality of the Church has been the instinct of generosity, and that remains fundamental.

The Christian World has had to face three great bacterial pandemics, each of which lasted for more than a century.

THE FIRST PLAGUE PANDEMIC, the “Plague of Justinian” arrived at Constantinople in 542. Pope Gregory the Great was elected in 590, after his predecessor Pelagius II died of the plague. Outbreaks continued until 750, weakening both the Byzantine and Persian Empires, leaving a power vacuum into which Islam stepped.

THE SECOND PLAGUE PANDEMIC, the “Black Death,” started in Central Asia in 1338 and spread along the Silk Route, decimating the populations of China, Europe and the Middle East. As many as 125 million people died worldwide, 50 million in Europe. Three quarters of the people of Germany died, including 7/8 of her priests, because they administered the last rites to the dying. Outbreaks continued for centuries: in 1630 a million people died in France; in 1665 the Great Plague of London took away 100,000.

THE THIRD PLAGUE PANDEMIC started in China in 1855, and swept back and forth across the planet for a century, hitting Hawaii in 1899 and San Francisco in 1900. The Catholic countries of Paraguay (1899), Portugal (1899), Philippines (1900), South America (1908), Cuba and Puerto Rico (1912) took their turns. Modern travel carried this plague around the globe faster, but modern medicine helped to alleviate it.

During the Second Pandemic, in 1377, the authorities of the city-state of Ragusa in the Venetian Empire (Dubrovnik in present-day Croatia) noticed that the cloistered nuns and monks did not seem subject to the same mortality rate as the rest of the city. So they put the whole city under cloister rules, and soon the outbreaks ceased. News spread of their success, and eventually lockdowns became

standard procedure for dealing with epidemics. This did much to reduce the mortality rate of subsequent outbreaks. All Catholics should know, then, that distancing and quarantine, which is a way of life for cloistered religious, is the basis for the modern strategy of shelter-in-place.

In 1576 there were crop failures in Lombardy, followed by an outbreak of the plague. The civil authorities imposed a total curfew on the city of Milan, and people could not leave their homes even to visit a church. Saint Charles Borromeo, Archbishop of the city, offered Mass alone in the middle of the cathedral square, with people attending from the windows of their homes. Among them were the cloistered nuns of the Convent of Saint Radegonda, looking out the barred windows of their convent.

The church managed the hospitals of Europe throughout the first two pandemics. The Knights of Malta were founded to help sick pilgrims. In 1591 the Jesuit scholastic Aloysius Gonzaga died of the plague, contracted while caring for plague victims in the hospitals of Rome. Catholic hospitals today continue a heritage of service that goes back for over a thousand years.

Starting in 1917, the viruses returned with a vengeance. Over the course of eighteen months, the “Spanish” Flu (which actually started in Kansas) took the lives of 50 million people around the world, including 675,000 Americans. There were three surges of illness, and the third died down when the Armistice was signed ending the First World War. The War was certainly a vector for this virus: American troops carried it to Europe, and the German army was infected by their American

captives. The health commissioner of Washington DC banned both indoor and outdoor religious ceremonies. The Bishop of Denver allowed outdoor ceremonies, but not the Mass. Two of the three Fatima children died of Spanish flu – Francisco Marto (4 April 1919) and his sister Jacinta (20 February 1920).

The last century has seen a witches’ brew of viral epidemics – Asian flu (1957-58), Hong Kong flu (1968-69), HIV (1980s onwards), Swine flu (2009-10), SARS (2003), MERS (2012 onwards) and now COVID-19 (2019 onwards). During the 2003 SARS epidemic in Toronto and Hong Kong, Mass continued but there were bans on hearing confessions, distributing palms, washing of feet, the sign of peace, kissing of the cross, holy water fonts, hymnbooks and communion from the cup. Catholics display good citizenship by accepting temporary constraints on outward religious observance, to promote the common good by containing disease, relying on the inner strengths which only religion can provide.

This year, most of the one billion Catholics in the world will have to worship alone or in the family circle. None of us feel good about it. But the people and priests are brave, and our spirit is strong. The current pandemic is not our first rodeo. We have always been here for each other, and for everybody. We are still here now, and we will be here until the end of time. We’re not going anywhere but up.

–Father Joseph Ponessa,
Diocese of Great Falls-Billings