

DAYS OF TRIBULATION



The days of tribulation that we are experiencing have given a central role to communication, both with regard to tackling the health crisis today and giving a new shape to the future.

We can only imagine what isolation would have been like without the possibility of communicating!

Let's imagine what the world would be like during this pandemic if the Network that keeps us united over distances were to collapse—a Net that allows the scientific community to share its research, the political world to compare ideas about what measures to take, the economy to question itself about the limits of development and about new and more equitable economic models, and all of us to see and speak with one another, to work and pray, laugh and smile together, to share our knowledge and emotions via computer or smartphone with relatives and friends wherever they are.

Digital communication has become the social infrastructure of these new times, the main place of relationships, of shared thought and of common action. In these days, we have blessed the digital civilization for the sharing it has allowed us to engage in and for the distances it has eliminated.

But how can we avoid the risk that virtual reality might replace physical proximity? That neighborly relationships will be reduced to zero? And how can we transpose physical encounters consisting of shared thoughts, work and prayer, to the virtual dimension?

In this period, we applauded the flowering of spontaneous initiatives capable of uniting what was previously divided and of gathering together people of good will.

We also shuddered in the face of the emergence of festering grudges that have never been eliminated, the rebirth of prejudices, the resurgence of the temptation to resolve everything by pointing a finger at this or that scapegoat.

We worried about theories springing from the idea that we can start afresh from the same mistakes. We found ourselves at a crossroads: to either rely on technology alone or else give it a soul; to lose ourselves in an inability to communicate or else to re-discover communion. Each of us should feel the responsibility of searching for the truth so as to avoid becoming a channel for spreading fake news. We can seek to understand the signs of the times or deny them. We can communicate despair or hope. But everything depends upon what we base our hope. It depends upon our ability to live in the present reality without being corrupted by it. We need a change of pace: a different attitude, greater trust and faith, a pure gaze, in order to give a new form to the things of yesterday, ensure that isolation does not become loneliness, respond to the unhealthy union of the pandemic with the healthy union of good will. Finding a new and sounder balance between the local and the global calls for creative witness, intelligence and above all faith and works.

Looking back to pre-pandemic times, we also need to make an examination of conscience.



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Did we really communicate back then? Or is the communication we regret losing like the onions of Egypt mourned by the Israelites in the desert? To what degree did our communication build community? To what degree did it build closed groups?

And, like the Exodus, can this journey through the desert help us become more sincere when we finally meet again in streets, public squares and churches?

Paradoxically, the impossibility of getting together with one another during the quarantine period, and the prospect of once

again interacting with one another in the foreseeable future only if we observe social distancing, has revived our yearning for genuine relationships with others. It has helped us rediscover the importance and beauty of our bodies. It has helped us look with a new gaze at our next-door neighbors, our streets and our neighborhoods. It has made us understand how big a responsibility we have as believers to help build welcoming and supportive communities.

We can already see the signs, the seeds, of this. But those seeds have to take root in good soil. It is up to us, in our local areas, to offer others a network of meaning, work and sharing. As Pope Francis said on the afternoon of 27 March in an empty St. Peter's Square, but with all humanity virtually present in that epochal moment of prayer, it is up to us "to find the courage to open spaces in which everyone feels called to participate and that allow new forms of hospitality, fraternity and solidarity to emerge."

This is the communication we must offer. A communication based on relationships that combat the virus of division. A communication based on a network that is both global and local, digital and real, and that is meant to unite, not divide; to give, not to sell or buy. A communication capable of giving technology a dimension that transcends it. If social distancing should continue, if the coronavirus becomes endemic, it will be up to communication to take on an antiviral role that concretizes the "we/us" rendered impossible by distance. To separate isolation from solitude. If social distancing ends, it will depend on how we have learned to build "togetherness"—the way in which we reconnect with one another.

Contrary to what we often think, "communicating" means not only transmitting information (which can be either false or true). Communication (also of information) means not only making sure that what is said by the "center" reaches everyone. Ecclesial communication is not a matter of "catechizing" from on high. Communication, we are discovering, is more than that. Much more than that. Without the truth of an encounter, there is no communication.

Communicating means establishing relationships. It means *being with*. Communicating means listening. For us, as Church, this means generating a vibrant environment



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where Christ is present in the ability of all the baptized to listen to others and offer them their witness to him.

Turning our thoughts to the "post-pandemic" period, the theme of communication concerns, as the Pope said, another virus—the social virus of division. And this is where communication once again plays a decisive role.

The question is how to use mobile devices and the Net to keep alive relationships established among people. To build an economy of sharing. To profile people not according to their consumer capacities but according to their capacity to make a gift of themselves. This gifting can take many forms: the gift of one's time, skills, money, prayer....

But people are willing to make this self-donation only when they feel that they are collaborating with one another to build mutual values. It is time to create collaborative projects that assess, refine and classify the communicative surplus characteristic of human beings.

The time has come to organize communication around communities subdivided according to "wharves of content" so as to redistribute surplus materials, knowledge, love.

This will allow us to bear witness to the Church as an opportunity for upright relationships between people, and between people and regions. In a different world. A radically different world. Today, more than ever before, strength is found in union. Even if the opposite might seem to be true.

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