Memo from Covid-19
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Abstract: The Covid-19 virus has swept violently through the world in 2020. This short article suggests ten ways the crisis has had a spiritual impact. These range from a new focus on death as life’s horizon to the experience of the contingency of life’s projects, from the rediscovery of universal fraternity to a new appreciation of the need for contemplative care for our planet, from greater recognition of the need to make time for prayer to consideration of the link between spirituality, solidarity and justice. While recognizing that each point deserves further exploration, the author offers the article as a “memo” written in the midst of a crisis, contextualizing each point within the broader Christian spiritual tradition. He takes his cue from Chiara Lubich, who wrote: “Jesus Forsaken! What’s important is that when he passes by, we are attentive to hear what he wants to tell us, because he always has new things to say.”

Introduction
In March 2020, Covid-19 plunged us all into a new landscape. We had to find our bearings amid radically unsettled landmarks of routine and schedule and the gathering, ominous dark clouds of uncertainty, risk and fear. The powerful words of Pope Francis in St. Peter’s Square for the extraordinary Urbi et Orbi on March 27th captured the situation: “Thick darkness has gathered over our squares, our streets and our cities; it has taken over our lives, filling everything with a deafening silence and a distressing void, that stops everything as it passes by; we feel it in the air, we notice in people’s gestures, their glances give them away. We find ourselves afraid and lost.”

In this short article, I want to propose something of a memo regarding some of the spiritual dimensions that this crisis awoke in people, albeit to varying degrees. I am conscious that future reflections will go deeper and will benefit from data gleaned from many disciplines – from economics to pastoral ministry, sociology and politics. Be that as it may, it is good, from the heart of the experience, to jot down some of the spiritual perspectives that emerged during the Coronavirus invasion into our lives. There will inevitably be a certain overlapping between some of the points as well.

Before setting out, however, it is important to acknowledge the difficult situations of bereavement during this time. Many people are also facing uncertainty in their employment, and issues of domestic violence and mental health concerns have grown. This has not been an easy time. The Cross has cast its shadow on many.

Memento Mori ("Remember, you die")

The most immediate, universal, and profound experience during the Covid-19 crisis was the real proximate possibility of death. In the Western world we live so easily distracted from any real thought of death; it remains deceptively on our distant horizon. But suddenly, while the Angel of Death was said to wield its scythe more frequently on the elderly, the Coronavirus was clearly capricious and could strike anyone at any age with potentially devastating impact.

In Medieval times, when plagues abounded, artists readily depicted the symbol of a skull in their artistic works. They repeated the maxim “memento mori” ("remember you die"). Daily updates on Covid-19 fatalities were a kind of “skull” image put before us with its “memento mori.” Significantly, the virus took hold in Europe in the season of Lent, beginning on Ash Wednesday with the solemn words: “Remember, you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

Were there salutary effects of this head-on reminder of death? Yes, though mostly deep down and hidden from public view, lawyers told me they saw an increase in people making their wills! The great spiritual teachers often suggested that keeping death before us provides a valuable horizon that facilitates our discernment in life. St. Ignatius of Loyola, for instance, suggested that when making important decisions, we should imagine ourselves at the end of our lives either about to die or after our death standing before Christ our Judge. How would we feel about our decisions then? The fact of death can often clarify life. Who knows what impact this closer encounter with the possibility of death has had on future societal developments.

For Christians, as we moved towards Easter, looking death in the eye became an invitation to discover what the late Bishop Klaus Hemmerle called “Easter eyes.” After all, it is a central Christian belief that Jesus is risen and those who die in him rise. And we can already experience something of the Resurrection through a life of faith, hope and love here on earth. In an Easter greeting, Hemmerle wrote,

I wish that we could all have Easter eyes
Capable of looking
into death, until we see life
into the hurts, until we see forgiveness, 
into separation, until we see unity, 
into the wounds, until we see glory, 
into the human person, until we see God, 
into God, until we see the human person, 
into Myself until I see You. 
And in addition to this, to see the power of Easter!

"Vanity of vanities": Life’s Contingencies

Alongside the specific reminder of death, the contingency of our daily ventures was brought home to many during this crisis. It showed us we don’t have as much control as we thought we had. This microscopic virus caused a global tremor in stock markets, the decline of many businesses, and the silencing of so many projects that until a few weeks previously seemed all-consuming. I recall one person commenting to me on a project to which he had

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dedicated himself with passion saying, “it’s all in tatters now.” The words of the Preacher (Book of Ecclesiastes) expressed what many came to experience: “Vanity of Vanities; all is vanity.”

To suddenly lose one’s normal routine or work or security or colleagues was a suffering. But perhaps this suffering became a “cipher of Transcendence,” underlining in a new way what truly lasts beyond the comings and goings in our lives – God. Paul Hewson (Bono, singer with U2), commented a few years ago:

[I]t is becoming clear that the material world is not enough for anybody. We had a century of being told by the intelligentsia that we’re two-dimensional creatures, that if something can’t be proved, it can’t exist. That’s over now. Transcendence is what everybody, in the end, is on their knees for, running at speed toward, scratching at, kicking at.  

In an era when materialism and functionalism dominate, this crisis brought us closer to the “cell of self-knowledge” that Catherine of Siena spoke about so often. We got more in touch with who we are as creatures, “nothing,” and with God as Creator, “All.” Recognizing our limitations, weakness and fragility became an invitation to put God in the first place in our lives and not lean on counterfeits of what really lasts.

If we’re honest, we all became a little humbler because of this Covid-19 crisis. We began to recognize there are many towers of Babel we’ve tried to build solely with our own resources. Pope Francis, in the Urbi et Orbi homily mentioned above refers to this:

The storm exposes our vulnerability and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities... The tempest lays bare all our pre-packaged ideas and forgetfulness of what nourishes our people’s souls; all those attempts that anesthetize us with ways of thinking and acting that supposedly “save” us.

Humility is the recognition that I am wounded, needing healing, and ultimately that I am dependent, a mendicant of the love and strength of God and of others.

The Present Moment is to be lived well

Initially, there was a sense the Covid-19 crisis was just a temporary jolt, lasting a mere few weeks. But soon it became clear that the land of uncertainty we had entered was not just some two-week holiday. We needed patience, forbearance, and endurance to be good citizens in a new land of prolonged social distancing, staying at home, and lockdown.

The many references to “mindfulness” during this period of stress and strain were signs of a desire to focus on the present. It echoed the hallowed practice within the Christian tradition of living the present moment well. We normally spend so much time revisiting the past or planning and dreaming of the future, but easily ignore our focus on the present.

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Here Christians found a point of encounter with others. The Christian tradition presents what Fr. Jean Pierre De Caussade, S.J. (1675–1751) called the “sacrament of the present moment.” In abandoning ourselves to divine Providence, we can live each day as a gift that brings with it the grace of being able to see, hear and touch God’s closeness to us. Many spiritual teachers emphasize the present moment. St. Thérèse of Lisieux, for instance, famously said, “You know that to love you, Lord, I only have today.”

Contrary to a criticism sometimes leveled at Christians that their focus on the next life, somehow diminishes their sense of responsibility for this world, Christians view each moment as sacred and containing God. If lived well, it becomes a fragment of time that is transformative of our world because it inserts the eternal in the finite, projecting each action like a vector into the eternal.

We are all sisters and brothers, one family before God

Paradoxically, for a time characterized by so much isolation and social distancing, the months of restrictions turned out to be a privileged time for discovering our common humanity. We saw that we were all in the same boat. How often we saw that Coronavirus is blind to power and authority, wealth and status. Challenged by a common threat, we could recognize that we are one family before God, all sisters and brothers.

For Christians, this phenomenon, along with the temporary dismantling of the classic spiritually supportive scaffolding of the sacraments and ministerial services, focused our eyes on each neighbor as the sacrament of God. We saw in a new way how to build ourselves up as prayer reaching out to others and that Christian life is radically sister- and brother-centred. As people of the Eucharist, we saw more clearly how we must become “the people of the towel and the water,” as Canadian mystic, Catherine de Hueck Doherty, put it.

When Pope Francis and the other global religious leaders proposed, in the light of the 2019 Abi Dhabi Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together that we come together on May 14th for prayer, they were in many ways naming the discovery of our deep common humanity, one that binds us spiritually as children of the one God.

In an interview with the Italian newspaper, La Stampa, on March 20, 2020, Pope Francis noted:

I don't want to make a distinction between believers and nonbelievers. We are all human beings and as human beings we are all in the same boat. And no human thing must be alien to a Christian. Here we cry because we suffer. All of us. What helps us is synergy, mutual collaboration, the sense of responsibility and the spirit of sacrifice that is generated in many places. We don't have to make a distinction between believers and nonbelievers, let's go to the root: humanity. Before God we are all children.

We belong to one another as sisters and brothers, children of the one Father. We are all soul seekers. Perhaps we began to understand more deeply Pope John Paul’s comment at the beginning of the millennium, “To make the Church the home and the school of communion: that is the great challenge facing us in the millennium which is now beginning, if we wish to be faithful to God’s
Making Time for Prayer

In the increasingly frenetic lifestyle that characterized so much of our lives in recent years, so many minutes, hours, and days have been robbed from prayer. Now, suddenly, with the Coronavirus there was time for prayer.

Priests talked of being able to take time in prayer and not be in a rush. Prayer communities came to life on social media around local concerns and members of the community who were ill. Families developed prayer spaces in their homes. The prayer of intercession came powerfully to the fore. For those accompanying the dying, the Rosary became a prayer to be discovered. We heard of healthcare workers praying with the sick and dying when relatives were not permitted to be with them due to medical isolation. It was a time to recognize that prayer is not limited to sacramental rituals or church buildings. Prayer can be in the quiet of our rooms, in the silence of our heart and in the midst of responding to challenges.

We have lived something of a collective experience of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, the One who comes alongside us to help us keep our balance and make sure we don’t fall. St. Paul reminds us: “the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words” (Rom 8: 26). The Holy Spirit was the great Friend who was not on lockdown, consoling with his gifts. The basic spiritual operating system opened to us through Baptism was very much at work raising our minds and hearts to God.

Developing a Contemplative Look at our Planet

In several ways, the worldwide lockdown brought the world around us more to our attention. People became more aware of creation. The beauty of birdsong and the sunlight of April and May lifted our spirits. A reflection composed by the Irish Carmelite Richard Hendrick that went viral in the early stages of the Coronavirus crisis reflected this new consciousness of the words of love whispering in creation:

They say that in Wuhan after so many years of noise,
You can hear the birds again.
They say that after just a few weeks of quiet,
The sky is no longer thick with fumes,
But blue and grey and clear…
Today, breathe. Listen, behind the factory noises of your panic,
The birds are singing again,
The sky is clearing, Spring is coming,
And we are always encompassed by Love.

Writing some months later in The Tablet, Mary Colwell commented that while “God hears the endless symphony of the universe in its entirety,” each of us is one phrase of that music and “to be just one element that is broadcasting our sacred presence among a countless throng, is a privilege we must never forget.”

It has been a time to realize how much we are embedded in nature. We are not simply looking in at it. Everything is interconnected. The lockdown, with its slower pace, invited us to adopt

6. This poem is read by the author at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e6F6ZWbZeJl
a more contemplative approach to life. As people walked in parks, sat in gardens, exercised in their locality, they also took time to stop and look. We recall Pope Francis’s words in his encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si’*: “The universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely. Hence, there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person’s face. The ideal is not only to pass from the exterior to the interior to discover the action of God in the soul, but also to discover God in all things”8 (n. 233). Perhaps the Covid-19 crisis contributed to perceiving more clearly the wisdom in Francis’ appeal: “Today I believe we have to slow down our rate of production and consumption”9 and learn to understand and contemplate the natural world, reconnecting with our real surroundings.

The “We” Spirituality: Church community and sacraments.

Technology played an important role pastorally during this Covid-19 crisis. One of the lasting outcomes will surely be the discovery that there are many modern channels for communicating the spiritual – from apps to Facebook to WhatsApp to YouTube….

And yet the Coronavirus isolation and lockdown brought us to appreciate what we lacked – real personal encounter in community. And this resonated in our experience of liturgy. In a morning homily on April 17, Pope Francis commented on how on-line transmission of liturgy has been an expression of the Church in this difficult situation that the Lord has allowed, “but the ideal of the Church is always with the people and with the sacraments – always.” For Pope Francis our relationship with Jesus “is intimate, it is personal, but it is within a community.” He added that a personalized, familiar relationship with Christ “without the Church, without the people, without the sacraments, is dangerous.” Spirituality is incarnate. The mantra, “I’m spiritual but not religious,” has its limits.

The Bishop of the Diocese of Ossory (Ireland), Dermot Farrell, commented on the important place that sacraments have in what he called the day to day “in-between” times of our lives – the time that runs from our baptism, incorporating us into Christ, to the fulfillment of that journey in our passing from this life to the next. The sacraments accompany us, but they need the accompaniment of the People of God.

We experience the loss of this community dimension acutely because all the mysteries of our faith – the Sacraments, the Church, the Incarnation itself – cannot be relegated to the realm of the spiritual. The Sacraments that we miss are actions of the Christian community. They are Christ working among his people. That is why we celebrate them together in church, and are oriented to the “full and active participation of the whole community” (Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 14). Sacraments, then, are moments for we and not I.10

We have a Mother in Heaven.

The poignant scene of Pope Francis in a desolate, drizzly and darkening St. Peter’s Square at the Extraordinary *Urbi et Orbi* mentioned prior stands out in the memory of those who saw

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Massimiliano Perrotta, an Italian playwright, stage and screen director and screenwriter commented “No director could have invented such a powerful scene.”

Two religious symbols stood there silently to offer hope to the solitary pilgrim representing a world’s grief – the ancient icon of Mary Salus Populi Romani – usually housed in the Basilica of St. Mary Major – and the miraculous crucifix that had been brought in procession during previous epidemics in Rome.

The weeks of crisis became in the Catholic Church a time to turn again to Our Mother in Heaven in the earliest prayer we have to Mary: “We fly to thy patronage, O holy Mother of God; despise not our petitions in our necessities, but deliver us always from all dangers, O glorious and blessed Virgin. Amen.” In his Encyclical Letter on Mary, Mother of the Redeemer, Saint Pope John Paul II, wrote of Mary’s maternal mediation on our behalf:

At Cana in Galilee there is shown only one concrete aspect of human need, apparently a small one of little importance (“They have no wine”). But it has a symbolic value: this coming to the aid of human needs means, at the same time, bringing those needs within the radius of Christ’s messianic mission and salvific power. Thus, there is a mediation: Mary places herself between her Son and humankind in the reality of their wants, needs and sufferings.

From the earliest times, there has been an understanding of Mary as one who unties knots. Irenaeus and Justin described her in her obedience as untying the knot that bound humanity through Eve’s disobedience. Pope Francis often refers to a painting in the Perlach church in Augsburg by Johann Georg Melchior Schmidtner. It depicts Mary holding a white ribbon, and she is untying its knots. It’s an icon that Pope Francis came across while studying in Germany. With the many knots suddenly needing to be untied, this image of Mary speaks to us today, as we face the continuing impact and challenges of the Covid-19 crisis. It is perhaps no coincidence that Pope Francis directed that three extra invocations should be added to the Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary: “Mother of Mercy,” “Mother of Hope,” and “Solace of Migrants”.

Quo Vadis?

The words “Quo Vadis?” (“where are you heading?”) are associated with a story about St. Peter who, during an outbreak of persecution in Rome, was leaving the city when he met the Lord who was entering. Peter asked him: “Where are you heading?” The Risen Jesus replied, “I am going to Rome to be crucified again.” Peter understood and returned to the city where he was eventually martyred.

The months of Covid have not been a time of persecution but a moment to reflect on our world’s history, its direction, and the part each of us plays in it. Many have reflected with gratitude on the role of frontline healthcare workers and those in essential services. It has been a time to recognize again that Christian faith, though eminently personal, is never private or individual, sentimental or introspective, nor what Pope Francis and others call “self-referential.” It is a calling to “go forth.”

Ultimately, our interest in salvation is not just about reaching heaven as a personal gain, but rather it is about contributing to building a world where things are “on earth as it is in heaven.” The Kingdom of God is not a future event increasingly more distant as time progresses. Rather, it is an event forever breaking into this world from the future, always in the here and now. The sacraments are signs of the future, signs of the triune life of God opened up for us in Jesus Christ, but these visible signs are linked to the here and now of history. The poem mentioned above by the Irish Carmelite Richard Hendrick OFM puts it like this:

All over the world people are slowing down and reflecting;
All over the world people are looking at their neighbors in
a new way; All over the world people are waking up to a
new reality. To how big we really are. To how little control
we really have. To what really matters. To Love.13

The landscape we found ourselves in certainly has had its positives. For families that get on well, it brought the good experience of quality time together. For many it was an occasion to review life-work balance and great altruistic creativity in communities was much in evidence. But the landscape also showed up inequalities in our world between those who have and those who have not. We noticed the digital divide, not least in education. We realized how neglected our elderly may have become in nursing homes. When we considered fears experienced here in Ireland about how our hospitals might be overwhelmed if we failed to keep up our social distancing routine, we looked with horror on countries in

the developing world when hearing facts such as Malawi having one intensive care (ICU) bed for every one million people, or Sierra Leone having no ICU beds and South Sudan having two ventilators for 12 million people.

Perhaps, a new global awareness has begun to develop. Spirituality and solidarity have begun to rhyme together. Issues of justice and the common good emerged. There has been talk of a universal basic common wage. In God’s plan, our world is marching towards unity. A healthy Christian spirituality will express itself as leading to identification with the living Church at the service of God’s mission. Each person can leave a mark in history.

Conclusion
St. Paul affirms that “all things work together for good for those who love God” (Rom 8:28). All things, including things during a crisis like Covid-19.

In a poignant text written some years ago, proposing we try to recognize the face of the Crucified and Forsaken Jesus in the adversities of life, Servant of God Chiara Lubich commented, “Jesus Forsaken! The important thing is that when he passes by we are attentive to hear what he wants to say to us, because he always has something new to tell us.”14 Perhaps the deepest invitation that we have received in this Covid-19 crisis is the invitation to recognize that we are not alone and that the sufferings that have grazed us are not meaningless: “Jesus Forsaken [...] uses circumstances to form us, to smooth out the rough edges of our character, to sanctify us. The invitation is “to take all these voices

13.https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e6F6ZWhZeJI

of circumstances as his voice. All that happens around me happens for me; it is all a choral expression of God’s love for me.”

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