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A Wish in Time of Tribulation

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Carmel,

What we've been experiencing, more or less, all over the world for a few weeks can certainly be called a trial. In the New Testament there is a word, *thlipsis*, generally translated as "tribulation", which perhaps helps us name what we are experiencing. I mean not only a scientific name (like COVID-19 pandemic), or a name that expresses our immediate reaction (like emergency, war, calamity), but a name that brings us back to salvation history, to the truth of a God who has spoken to humanity, who became man and continues to walk with the children of men.

The danger, in fact, is to face this time, so serious and important, either by leaving faith out completely or, vice versa, by resorting to a religiosity that has little to do with the God revealed in Jesus Christ. Pope Francis warned us: "Do not waste these difficult days!" It is normal that each one of us - like every responsible citizen - scrupulously follows the rules to avoid the spread of contagion, generously accepts the small sacrifices this entails and does what is in our power to help our neighbor and to create a climate of peace and humanity around us. It is equally normal that, as believers, we turn to God and pray for the sick, for those who care for them, for the many deceased, for the scientists involved in the search for a vaccine, and for all those who are destitute due to the economic crisis. And yet, there is a deeper level which has to do with the reading history with faith, with the presence of God in the midst of humanity's tribulations and trials. It is a level to which we perhaps prefer not to enter, remaining in silence. Silence is golden when it is a space for reflection, for an interior search, for listening in depth. Silence is not golden when it is the result of spiritual inertia and a blockage of thought, when we limit ourselves to swallowing massive doses of information without assimilating, evaluating, and processing it. Information which does not form us, but rather invades and weighs us down.

It is right to ask ourselves: do we have a word that comes from silent meditation and that can serve us at this time? A believing and praying word that can orient us, that is "a lamp for our steps and light on our path"? I confess that questions of this kind would be spontaneously and simply answered: no; at least for now we do not. The admission of this poverty would in any case be truer and appreciable than many easy and sometimes misleading speeches. But we cannot remain calm and inoperative when we lack this light and it is our duty to walk and accompany other people along the way. If we only worry about the health emergency and the consequent economic crisis, "What are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do the same?" (Mt 5,47). We are asked something more: to "search groaning" as Pascal said, to beg, to knock without tiring until a ray of light, a glimmer of heaven opens up for us and allows us to *andar en verdad*, to walk in truth.

In this spirit, I return to that word of the New Testament: *thlipsis*, tribulation. To begin with, tribulation is not a good thing; it is not a grace. Its synonyms are *anguish*, *persecution*, *hunger*, *nudity*, *danger* (Rom 8:35). There is a power of death that is at work in every form of tribulation and this

power puts us to the test, leads us into temptation by standing between us and Christ, between our weak and wounded humanity and the power of his resurrected life. The shadow of death that the power of tribulation casts on each of us is such that it obscures the sight of him who is beyond it. We would remain separated from light and life if in that same shadow, in that same death, there was not a trace, a presence of life. For the Christian, tribulation is always the place through which Christ has passed, indeed through which Christ continues to pass and leads us towards the light of Easter. When we say that we are saved, that we believe in salvation, we concretely believe that evil and death are already definitively defeated. But we also say something more difficult to accept, and above all to live and bear witness to, that the encounter with risen life is always in the crossing of evil and death. Tribulation continues to be what it is: the experience of pain and anguish, of bewilderment and affliction, but the force that pushes down, crushing and oppressing, is contrasted by a force that pushes forward and upwards attracting and raising. All the negative, humiliating, and annihilating force of tribulation consists in the temptation to separate us from Christ. And to this temptation we would certainly yield if the tribulation were not the tribulation of the body of Christ. If it were not a wound of his crucified and risen body, we would not be saved, nor could we emerge victorious from the struggle. Even if tomorrow, as if by magic, the pandemic were to end, even if everything were to begin again magically as if nothing had happened, we would not be saved.

In the *thlipsis* there is a forward movement, as if at a certain point history could make a leap, an acceleration towards the future. I think that one of the elements of consolation in tribulation (cf. 2 Cor 1:4) is precisely this: being able to perceive the shortness of time, the coming of the Kingdom. Can we hear, in the silence of this crisis, the "shepherd's whistle" which is almost imperceptible and yet has the strength to lead us back to him and to ourselves in him (cf. *Interior Castle*, 4M 3,2)?

Right now, we are confined at home, we have no freedom of movement. It is particularly hard not to be able to celebrate the Eucharist with the faithful, to hear confessions, to impart the anointing of the sick, to celebrate funerals for the many deceased, and to accompany families. If in the epidemics of the past men and women religious, priests and bishops, were in the front line alongside the suffering, today this is not possible. We are called to take a step back and make room for doctors, nurses, and volunteers who are the true heroes of this pandemic of the Third Millennium. To them, as is right, go the applause, gratitude, and admiration of the people. Should that worry us? Is the Church losing visibility and perhaps even credibility? There are those who think and speak of the levelling and subordination of the Church to civil authorities. I understand the bitterness, I understand the discomfort, but why do we constantly forget that the ways of the Lord are not our ways and His thoughts are not our thoughts? "Without doubt it is a great grace to receive the Sacraments, but when the good Lord does not allow it, it is all the same, everything is a grace," (St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus, *Carnet jaune*, 5.6.4). Why do we continue to think that the Church must impose herself on the world with the strength and wisdom of the world? If today we are given to live a time of kenosis, a time of concealment and loss, why refuse it? I am reminded of the prophetic words the theologian Joseph Ratzinger said 50 years ago on the radio about the future of the Church:

From the crisis of today the Church of tomorrow will emerge — a Church that has lost much. She will become small and will have to start afresh more or less from the beginning. She will no longer be able to inhabit many of the edifices she built in prosperity. As the number of her adherents diminishes, so it will lose many of her social privileges. [...] But in all of the changes at which one might guess, the Church will find her essence afresh and with full conviction in that which was always at her center:

faith in the triune God, in Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, in the presence of the Spirit until the end of the world. In faith and prayer she will again recognize the sacraments as the worship of God and not as a subject for liturgical scholarship. The Church will be a more spiritual Church, not presuming upon a political mandate, flirting as little with the Left as with the Right. It will be hard going for the Church, for the process of crystallization and clarification will cost her much valuable energy. It will make her poor and cause her to become the Church of the meek. The process will be all the more arduous, for sectarian narrow-mindedness as well as pompous self-will will have to be shed.

It will take time for this transformation, Ratzinger said, and I would add, it will take tribulations to broaden our views and bend our obstinacy. Perhaps part of this process is also the tribulation that today besieges us and imprisons us in the face of which we feel totally powerless.

Restrictions on freedom of movement are the aspect that strikes us most, forcing us to radically change our habits. But, when you think about it, it is not so much the space that we lack, especially for us, friars and nuns, who generally live in large buildings, perhaps even with a large garden. What we lack is rather time. We realize this now precisely because we have too much of it. The time we have makes us discover that we do not know how-to live-in time, that we have lost the dimension of time and therefore we must find it again. Today there is a superabundance of runners, joggers, hikers, trekkers ... significantly all terms of a global language, a *koiné*, that probably not even English speakers can recognize as their mother tongue. Instead there is a shortage of *viatores*, wayfarers and pilgrims in time. The eyes of the pilgrim are not fixed on the way, but on the destination; the pilgrim is not interested in the kilometres travelled, but in those that are missing to reach the place towards which his whole being is stretched. Because this is why he is on the way, because he is attracted by something that is not here, but beyond, something that he does not see, but for which he yearns.

The limitation of movement in no way prevents this movement towards the future; on the contrary, it could promote and stimulate it. We realize today that for us not to move means to sit in the present as on an empty and fragile box, which in order not to give in must be filled with things, with concrete, solid, and possessable objects. We have forgotten the sense of waiting; we cannot resist the emptiness and the tension of desire from which waiting springs. In fact, waiting is for those who love and not knowing how to wait means, after all, not knowing how to love. Waiting does not fill our empty space with objects, but with the subject we love. For this reason, waiting is also the time of memory, of retracing the plot of time in order to recognize the traces, signs, and parables of the one who has already come and who will come. Indeed, he is already coming "to make me certain / of his and my treasure". Without memory and without waiting, what would be left of us, little men and women?

Waiting for the Risen One, Happy Easter to all of you!

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