

## What Have We Learned in the Pandemic?

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish  
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It is an article of our faith that in Divine Providence “nothing is allowed to happen except to the end that something good may come out of it” (AC #6489). People who trust in the Divine, therefore, know that for them “all things are moving towards an everlasting state of happiness, and that *no matter what happens at any time to them, it contributes to that state*” (AC #8478:3). Indeed, “Those who trust in the Lord are constantly receiving good from Him, for whatever happens to them, whether it seems to be advantageous or not advantageous, is nevertheless good, for it serves as a means contributing to their eternal happiness” (AC #8480:3).

None of this is meant to suggest that only good things happen in this world. Obviously a LOT of bad things happen. Really bad things. Every day. To millions of people. But the point is that the Lord provides for good in spite of all that. As Isaiah said, “His hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; nor is His ear heavy, that it cannot hear” (Isa. 59:1). We know that He is working constantly, in every least detail of our lives, to ensure that something good can come out of every evil, and that we can benefit if we put our trust in Him.

So what have we learned, or what CAN we learn, from the pandemic that has disrupted the civil and economic affairs of the whole world, not to mention the mental health and physical lives of millions?

One of the things the recent crisis certainly has taught us is that we can't know the future. Yes, we can and we should use our prudence, such as it is, to make plans and anticipate problems, but only the Lord knows the future, only He can foresee what will actually happen. So our best advice always is to look to Him for guidance.

In the history of the world, many wars have been won or lost on factors that nobody could have anticipated. For example, one reason Athens lost the Peloponnesian War in the fifth century BC was that they counted on the defenses of their well-fortified city to withstand the strongest possible siege – and then in close quarters they were hit with a plague that wiped out thousands of their people. Sound familiar? Only today it's airports, cruise ships, restaurants and factories. Again, they had the most powerful navy in the Mediterranean Sea, but it was powerless against the forces of nature in storms that decimated their fleet.

Of course, today we understand a lot more about disease, contagion and the weather than ever before, but the lesson is that there are still mysteries to be solved, and you never know what might be next. For that matter, it is NOT clear that we yet understand the principles of *spiritual* disease or contagion, and in the face of eternity that remains a huge problem. As for the weather, despite what we know, the causes of changes in the earth's climate are hotly debated even today, with implications for the very survival of the planet.

What is the answer? Well, one answer is that we need to ***be mindful of our priorities.*** “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth,” the Lord said, “where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal” (Matt. 6:19). The Lord certainly intends for us to enjoy the delights of this world, but for them to be real blessings they have to be kept subordinate to the useful work of real charity toward the neighbor (AC #995-997). Otherwise they are folly at best, and almost always destructive in the end.

***Another thing we can learn is the value of being alone with our thoughts.*** Maybe some of you have noticed how awkward it can feel to be withdrawn from the active sphere of other people and things during an enforced period of “social distancing.” But the Lord has clearly told us that we need to get comfortable with the practice of quiet reflection and *self-examination* so that we can see clearly what is going on in our spiritual lives and make relevant adjustments. Hopefully during the pandemic we have learned useful things about ourselves, our priorities and our daily habits that will stand us in good stead going forward. And we will have learned the importance of doing this as a matter of routine self-discipline, without waiting for another crisis.

In this connection, ***a third major benefit,*** or good, we can gain from this great tragedy is the understanding that ***we do need to moderate our cravings for worldly stuff.*** How much is enough? How much is too much – and compared to what? Again, the Writings are clear that there is nothing wrong with wealth or prosperity, but when a small percentage of the population controls most of the world’s wealth there is clearly something out of whack. What is wrong with a system that promotes this imbalance? What can we learn about the distribution of wealth that is consistent with the doctrine of charity and usefulness? And in our own lives, ***do we really need a bigger, better whatever?*** Do we really need the very latest technology, the *new* as opposed to the second-hand, the costly instead of the modestly priced? Yes, in some cases maybe we do, but we should be thinking about this in relation to what *else* we could be doing with the money – to help those less fortunate than ourselves. Same thing with the expenditure of time: how much time do we devote to our own pleasure in contrast to the pleasure and needs of others?

This leads to ***a fourth point, and a critical question: what does it mean to be mindful of others’ needs? How can we moderate our consumption of wealth in such a way that it truly benefits others?*** Of course we don’t want to give indiscriminately: that could be very foolish for all concerned (see AC #3688 & NJHD #85). But there are countless charities, not to mention the church, that are well organized to maximize the positive impact of our donations in very focused, very well calculated ways. And we can afford to be generous! Even the poorest of us are better off than literally billions of people on this planet. Billions! And why should we care? - because the Lord cares, and to love the Lord is to love as He loves (AC #2023), which is to do the very best we can to serve our neighbors. This actually is the joy itself of heaven (HH #268, CL 1-26, etc.), so if we want to “go” to heaven we need to get in the habit of being truly generous.

Just as a minor illustration, many of you will have noticed during the pandemic how really nice it felt to reach out to friends and family members, and even to total strangers with offers of help on

many levels, from the creation of face masks to the running of errands, shopping, and doing your bit to aid struggling businesses. Imagine building on those feelings by developing ongoing habits of giving like that, where we actually look for things to do rather than waiting for some major new problem to force the issue.

*A fifth benefit* you may have noticed is that *the level and content of our communication with others may have grown stronger or deeper* over the course of our social distancing. Not being as present as usual with one another in person meant that when we *were* able to connect, we often talked about more important things than usual, or expressed our feelings a little more openly than we had done before. In addition, many of us found ourselves communicating by phone or email with people we hadn't seen or spoken with for years, just to re-connect. How did that feel? And *what can we learn from this about the value of regular, caring communication?*

When we're caught up in the daily grind we may find that we don't have time for the personal connections we really value – or should value. And why is that? Do we need to reconsider how we allocate time for such things in the normal course of our lives?

*Sixth on this list* of things we can learn from the pandemic is *the importance of thinking long term*. Let's face it: if we get too caught up in the moment, the problems we are experiencing may seem overwhelming, but as they say, "This, too, will pass." We need to learn to be patient, *consider the use and purpose of temptations, and visualize a positive outcome*. One of the persistent problems of our age is the feeling that we can't wait; we can't bear the present situation any longer. And yet if we knew, absolutely, that it would be over in a few days, wouldn't it be easier to bear? What about a few weeks? The thing is, we don't know, but that is not a reason to despair, or to do something foolish. The allies fighting in WW 2 had *no idea* when it would be over, but they persevered because of what it meant for the future of the world. Imagine if they had given up as soon as they faced any major defeat or loss of life.

The truth is that nothing is permitted unless some good can come out of it. But that good can't be measured in days or even years: it's spiritual. It's about eternal values, and so it can't be discounted by the number of days or years it takes to realize it. Rather, because it is timeless *it is actually present in the striving*, not just in the achievement of a particular natural outcome. Good thing, too, since we are never going to be fully regenerate, but we're involved in a never-ending *process* of regeneration, a process that brings its own reward as we learn to trust the Lord and His providence.

This points directly to *a seventh benefit* we can gain, not just from this pandemic but from any crisis we may face in our lives, and that *is to learn to be mindful of our sources of information*. The viral crisis has spawned every imaginable conspiracy theory and given countless opportunists a chance to play on our fears and prejudices, often citing scientific or statistical reports in support of their claims. In many ways it seems we are as vulnerable to their attacks as we are to the virus itself. How can we really know who's telling us the truth? How can we possibly

investigate every claim in the depth or detail needed to be sure we understand? The truth is, we can't! At some point we have to make a decision not so much about *what* to trust as *who* to trust, and that's where the study of the Word and what it teaches about human nature comes in.

Think about it. We are clearly taught that people who lie, cheat, or commit adultery can't be trusted. And people who have conflicts of personal interest ought to be received with a great deal of caution. What do they have to gain from what they're telling us? What do they have to lose if we don't believe them? And where are THEY getting their information?

Of course there are always going to be varying perspectives on the truth, what we sometimes call *appearances* of truth, but in the end there can be only one truth, one ultimate reality. Even science, which has become a sort of sacred cow in our culture, can only approach the truth based on a certain consistency of evidence provided by controlled experiments, and even then we have to ask, how limited are the controls? Every revolution in science has come about as a result of new information that changed the entire paradigm of the what was "known" before.

But in the Word we have an infinite source of truth – about God, the human mind, the very nature of creation, eternal life and, of course, Divine Providence. And so, taking all the other things we may have learned during the pandemic and applying them to this last point, if we will take seriously the discipline of humbly reading and reflecting on the Word, especially in the light of its spiritual sense, every day we will learn more and more about the way the world works, about who and what can be trusted, and especially about how we can co-operate with the Lord to serve the planet, our neighbors and ourselves in the best possible ways for the long term.

So, to summarize just seven of the many good things we've had the opportunity to learn over the last few months, here's today's starter list:

1. We can't know the future. We can plan, but it's *good* and often *necessary* to be prepared to adapt when things don't go according to the plan.
2. It's *good and useful* to take time away from the hustle of life, *to reflect and quietly examine ourselves*, our motives and our priorities.
3. It's *good* to moderate our cravings, *to consider what we really need*, and what we really *don't* need.
4. It's *good – and rewarding - to be mindful of other people's needs*. We are way better off than *billions* of people on this earth. We can afford to be generous.
5. It's *good* to stay in touch with the people we love or care about, and *to communicate with them in heartfelt, meaningful ways*.
6. It's *important* to think long term, to be patient, *to appreciate the value of struggle*, and not get too caught up in the moment.
7. It's *important* to know who we can or can't trust, and most of all, to *trust in the Lord*, who is the only one who can teach us about eternal values.

No doubt any one of you could add to this list some other lessons YOU've learned. We certainly can't tell others how they should feel, but humbly sharing some of those insights might really help another person cope. And besides affirming the Lord's incredible provision of good in the midst of adversity, a conversation like that might actually inspire a greater sense of peace, confidence and courage all the way around – with positive effects in the whole community.

Amen.

That said, now it's YOUR turn. What can YOU add to this conversation today from your personal experience? What good things have YOU learned?

Lessons:     *Genesis* 45, on Providence in regard to Joseph being sold into slavery  
              *Matthew* 6:19-34 **or** *Luke* 12:13-34 on laying up treasures  
              *Arcana Caelestia* #6489, 8478:3 and 8480:2

**AC #6489**

The nature of the Lord's Providence is such that it is linked together with Foresight; the one does not exist without the other. For evil things are foreseen, but good ones are provided; and the evils things that are foreseen are constantly being turned towards what is good by means of the Lord's provident arrangement, since the Divine end, which has good in view, governs everything. Nothing is therefore allowed to happen except to the end that something good may come out of it. But because a person possesses freedom that enables him to be reformed, he is turned from evil towards good so far as he freely allows himself to be turned.

**AC #8478:3**

Those who trust in the Divine ... though concerned about the morrow, yet are unconcerned, in that they are not anxious, let alone worried, when they give thought to the morrow. They remain even-tempered whether or not they realize desires, and they do not grieve over loss; they are content with their lot. If they become wealthy they do not become infatuated with wealth; if they are promoted to important positions they do not consider themselves worthier than others. If they become poor they are not made miserable either; if lowly in status they do not feel downcast. They know that for those who trust in the Divine all things are moving towards an everlasting state of happiness, and that no matter what happens at any time to them, it contributes to that state.

**AC #8480:2**

Those who trust in the Lord are constantly receiving good from Him; for whatever happens to them, whether it seems to be advantageous or not advantageous, is nevertheless good, for it serves as a means contributing to their eternal happiness.