

10 Commandments for Responsible Pastoral Reactions to the Corona-Crisis

1. Let not your heart be overcome by fear

John 16,³³ "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."

The unprecedented global corona crisis is accompanied by many fears and anxieties which are an indication for how intensely this infectious disease challenges all economic, financial, social and health related systems on each society. While it is part of human life to have fear to realize dangers, which can threaten the health and integrity of our life, and biblical tradition knows of periods of tribulation Christian faith intends to overcome fatalism as well as any attitudes which lead to disempowerment and paralysation of human beings. The word from Jesus "Fear not; I have overcome the world" liberates us to strengthen sober and careful minds to develop integrated and responsible ways for dealing with the pandemic. What holds true to Christian life in general also applies in this emergency particularly: "Pray as if everything depends on God, act as if everything depends on us" (St. Augustine).

2. Follow protective medical advice to stay clean and wash your hands

James 4,⁸ "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded."

The wisdom of medical doctors, of experts of immunology and epidemiology is a precious gift of God, which he has granted to humankind in the history of growing medical research and insights. To protect oneself and to protect the weakest in society for further spreading the virus is part of the fundamental tasks of Christians in this period of crisis. Biblical tradition has an ancient respect and deep appreciation for the rituals of washing one's hands and to stay clean. While the ancient rituals of cleansing and purification in certain historical periods could be criticised if used only as an externalized automatic for achieving a healthy spiritual status before God, nobody should dismiss these regulations today as one of the essential and obligatory ways of halting or at least slowing down the spread of the virus.

3. Do not encourage religious stigmatization: The virus is not a punishment from God, but God is suffering with those who encounter illness

Ex 23,²⁵ "So you shall serve the Lord your God, and He will bless your bread and your water. And I will take sickness away from the midst of you."

God is not a cruel "master of the universe" sending waves of punishments to his beloved people. This kind of thinking leads to attitudes, which express condemnation and additional religious stigmatization for those who have to struggle with the disease. St. Paul has seen his own disease as a "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor 12,⁷), a burden to cope with, not a personal punishment by God but as something to strengthen his faith. God on the contrary wants to take away sickness from the people. The early church did not condemn the sick but rather developed rituals of accompaniment by which the closeness of God to these people could be assured: "Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord." (James 5,¹⁴)

4. Be aware of God's own suffering with the unfinished creation

Rom 8,²² "We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time."

The whole of creation is in an unfinished stage, God is suffering with his suffering creation. The church should give witness both to the beauty as well as to the groaning of creation. What human civilization has done to creation destabilizes some of the inner balances and complex regulatory frameworks imbedded in nature. As human civilization has transgressed planetary boundaries in several dimensions this affects also carefully maintained balances of micro-biotic milieus and the relationship between humankind and the world of animals and bio-organisms. The rigorous deforestation and expansion of industrialized zones of agriculture have pushed back the areas in which wild life can unfold without too close interaction with the milieus in which humankind can grow and survive. The phenomenon of zoonosis, the springing over of viruses from the animal realm to the human realm is also a result of the protracted human violation of creation, the destruction of natural habitats and the excessive overuse of animals for human consumption and industrialized exploitation. We will have to rethink our model of relating to natural resources and to animal life.

5. Protect churches and societies from false prophets and charlatans

Mathew 7,¹⁵ "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves."

Any crisis like this will be exploited by religious charlatans and false prophets which spread a religion of fear or encourage attitudes of ignorance trivializing and belittling the extent of the current crisis and use it to create their own fortune. Those who say that in coming to the church buildings despite public warnings to avoid mass gatherings you provide a witness of the strength of your personal faith are utterly wrong and provide dangerous distortions of proper Christian ethics. Those who say that all this is a result of a secret conspiracy or the virus is fabricated in some laboratories in whatever country are utterly wrong. We should not spread fake news, rumours and vague labelling. We should not lead each other into temptation nor put God to test. Rather we should strengthen each other to follow medically advised measures of caution and physical distancing. Those who stay sober-minded give a proper witness of faith: "Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Peter 5,8).

6. The true test of faith is not to defy public orders and measures of constraint but the endurance of mutual love and support

James 1,2-4 "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."

The true test of faith is not provided by ignorance over against medical advice but by the endurance in the service of loving support, respect and resistance over against any religious discrimination of those affected. Endurance can imply that we accept the precautionary measures of applying physical distancing to avoid the risk of infection, while this does not imply spiritual distancing from each other- as individuals, as communities, as churches in different parts of the world. On the contrary, churches all around the world have been very creative to develop new ways of expressing spiritual support, togetherness and the endurance of channels of hope in and between their communities. In all this is our clear biblical mandate: "do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others" (Philippians 2,4).

7. Provide support to all who work in front-line ministries of medical assistance, psycho-social care and direct social or material help

Rom 12,1-2 "I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."

The corona crisis is a huge challenge to the medical and care giving systems and staff in our societies. To provide our lives as living sacrifice for the service of the most vulnerable is a deep obligation and ancient virtue of Christian faith. Mobilize support in ways possible for

you to support those who stand in the front-line ministry of the medical and care-giving professions. Keep them in your daily prayers. Try to do your own best in following the biblical advice: "Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ." (Gal 6,2). This includes providing support for those who can become easy victims of high levels of domestic violence in a context where people are forced to stay together in limited spaces although they have difficulties in living with tensions. A policy of zero-tolerance should be applied to those who exploit the situation of vulnerable people, women and children and the elderly in current home isolation situations, while not being able to control their potential for violence and aggression.

8. Do not allow for xenophobic stereotypes to creep in and instigate hatred and discrimination

Ephesians 2,¹⁴⁻¹⁶ "For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility."

Based on false language and terminologies (even used by heads of state!) which speak of the "Wuhan virus" or the "Chinese virus" insinuating that the virus has a nationality or a priority regional affiliation. The coronavirus crisis is a global one and teaches us on the contrary how vulnerable we are all together as global humanity and how much we need each other to solve the most urgent problems of humankind.

9. Promote a closer interaction of faith communities and social and developmental agencies: Towards new structural approaches to ecumenical diaconia

Luk 10,³⁴⁻³⁵ "He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'"

A global crisis like this demands for a close interaction and good collaboration between the local churches and the institutional agencies of development collaboration and emergency relief. Local faith actors have a key role to play in education, psychosocial care and networking for immediate help. Agencies have to play a crucial role in providing material, financial and logistic resources. It was not necessary only for the Samaritan as an individual to take care of the wounded, but he asked an institution of diaconical assistance, to provide long-term support of care and medical help. This is the hour where the language of the localization of actors in emergency relief and support is put to its life test. WCC and ACT Alliance, the NCCs and the national ACT Forums have a task of working closely together.

10. Do not lose hope and new visions for a period even beyond the Corona-Crisis

Isaiah 41,¹⁰ "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

Revelations 21,⁴ "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

The pandemic underlines both the positive and negative side of our current models of globalization, showing our immense vulnerability through interconnectivity, but also indicating possibilities for rapid response mechanisms and nurturing a new political determination to collaborate together as a global community of nations. In view of the pandemic we will have to ask some profound questions on the way we have organized life, economies and medical systems until now, we will need to modify the way of globalization and to strengthen resilience of those who are suffering most. It is a scandal that some nations have refused to provide appropriate financial support for WHO and health related systems in the global South which now is now having dramatic and visible consequences. We need visionary political leadership and we need proper ethical leadership of churches as well as scientists to prepare visions of how to re-organize our life in order to strengthen the ability of humanity to act together, to overcoming narrow-minded nationalism as well as ethnocentrism and to face together the huge tasks which we have in front of us to curb the destruction of our planetary systems as otherwise humanity cannot survive. We are encouraged that this new common ethical thinking and envisioning of an alternative model of globalization and strengthening of an ecological and responsible civilization in living within the given planetary boundaries is inspired by biblical faith which tells us that God wants us not to sink in fatalism and fear, but to be inspired by his love to the whole of his beautiful earth.

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