

Reflections on Covid-19 from St. Patrick's College Maynooth

COVID-19 exposes the hope in our human fragility – Dr. Philip John Paul Gonzales

COVID-19 is one of the greatest crises that humanity has faced since the Second World War. We are in uncharted waters, and the crisis caused by the Coronavirus pandemic is real and unpredictable. It is dangerous too, not just because of continual health risk but also for the still unforeseeable political and economic fallout that cannot be fully predicted.

What then are we to do in the meantime as we slowly exit from the lockdown, pining for a return to normality, in a state of anxiety about an uncertain future? The German Romantic poet, Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843), has a famous line from his poem *Patmos* that reads, “But where there is danger, A rescuing element grows as well.”

I believe that the ‘rescuing element’ in the danger posed by the COVID-19 crisis can be discovered through a reflection on what it means to be human and to belong to a shared and co-dependent human community. In my view, the hope of our humanity lies not in the power and riches of twenty-first century late-capitalist humanity, but in our all-too-easily forgotten fragility of human existence.

Western humanity has been told, since the Enlightenment, that history is about progress and the mastery of nature through science and technology. In other words, humanity came of age, and became an autonomous sovereign master of its own destiny. Everything is negotiable, meaning that for the adulthood of modern enlightened humanity there are no dilemmas in human existence that cannot be resolved given enough time and the march of progress.

This dream of progress was dashed to pieces amidst the horrors of the twentieth century. How could a humanity so enlightened fall into the butchery of the First World War, to the barbarously restrained and calculated hatred of Auschwitz, to the Gulags of Soviet Russia and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in the Second World War and beyond. History is not a march of rational progress, but a witch’s brew of violence and horror.

While the bleak and painful truth of the last century is acknowledged in theory by most sensible people, in practice we often live as if the dream of progress and mastery has returned. The speed of advancements in technology and the global capitalist economy, since the end of the Second World War, is utterly unprecedented in human history.

The world of our grandparents, parents and even the world of our childhood is simply a different place and space from what it was before, as we enter more and more, the virtual world of cyberspace. How far can technology progress and how far can global markets really spread? Can disease be ended, can capitalist wealth, like the Gospel, reach all the corners of the earth, can the human become the transhuman, will artificial intelligence become the new norm?

With COVID-19's meteorite-like appearance, the world came to a screeching halt, all sureties were shaken, like the beginning of a post-apocalyptic film or novel. But rather than despair, let us search for a 'rescuing element' in the danger of the COVID-19 crisis.

We can do this if we give up our belief in the saving power of progress coupled with the view that we are sovereign agents in control of history. We need to accept that all things are not negotiable, not every dilemma can be resolved, there is mystery and there are aspects of existence that remain unmasterable. To be human is to live with and accept non-negotiable truths such as I will die, those I love will also die and thus to love is itself *the risk of our fragile human existence*. Once I love, once I open myself, receive from and give to another, I invite suffering and compassion into my/our shared life. That is non-negotiable and essential to what it means to be finite, not sovereign.

To belong to a shared humanity then is to be fragile, in need and not self-sufficient. And this is the delicate beauty and truth of human life and existence. We must be open to love for the other, beyond all calculation and control. If we give up our sovereign adulthood and relearn to receive the fragility of love, then the hope of the 'rescuing element' in the danger of this crisis will begin to arrive. In renouncing this adulthood, we once again become needful, trustful and co-dependent on the openness of our shared and exposed humanity. We must become, as the Gospel teaches, little children again. Here hope lies, not in the power of independence, but in the weakness of co-dependence which is *our* sustaining strength.

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