



Transformed by Hope, Let Us Rebuild Our Tomorrow!

**A Pastoral Letter to the People of God
in the Archdiocese of San Antonio
on the challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic**

**From the Most Rev. Gustavo Garcia-Siller, MSpS
Archbishop of San Antonio**

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“The pandemic deeply marked the lives of individuals and the history of the community. In order to honor the suffering of the sick and of so many deceased, above all, the elderly, whose life experience should not be forgotten, **we must rebuild our tomorrow**: it requires everyone’s commitment, strength and dedication. It means setting out anew from the countless witnesses of generous and gratuitous love, that have left an indelible impression in consciences and in the social fabric, teaching how much need there is of closeness, care, sacrifice in order to nurture fraternity and civil coexistence.” – Pope Francis¹

1. Ignited by the Holy Spirit, who dwells in our hearts, let us dive into the dynamics of the current times! Let us come in closer spiritual contact with God and with one another! Let us recognize and caress the Face of the Lord – whom we adore – in the flesh of every suffering brother or sister. And may our perception, thoughts, feelings and actions become a channel of God’s love for his children. *iVen, Holy Spirit, Ven!*

¹ Address to the doctors, nurses and healthcare workers from the Lombardy region, Clementine Hall, 20 June 2020. At the URL:
http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2020/june/documents/papa-francesco_20200620_operatorisanitari-lombardia.html

I. A Time of Distress

“My heart is overwhelmed, my pity is stirred.” (Hosea 11:8)

2. These words of Hosea, the prophet, express an emotion attributed to God which we experience now as we see so many brothers and sisters suffering in numerous ways due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Hundreds of thousands of people around the world have lost their lives, millions have suffered from the illness or have lost dear ones. Countless more are currently undergoing financial turmoil, necessary seclusion or find themselves facing varied causes of seemingly unbearable distress.

3. I am particularly heartbroken by the vicious exacerbation of neglect and abandonment experienced by those who have historically been left out and discarded from our society, and who are now undergoing even more hardships. Lack of access to basic needs, such as healthcare services, food, and shelter, has worsened during this crisis for groups of people whose dignity has been systematically ignored and who – consciously or not – are too often being looked upon with indifference or disdain. While the scientific community works to find a cure for COVID-19, “we must also cure a larger virus, that of social injustice, inequality of opportunity, marginalization, and the lack of protection for the weakest.”²

² Pope Francis, General Audience, Library of the Apostolic Palace, 19 August 2020. At the URL: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200819_udienza-generale.html

4. More than ever immigrants, for instance, are being treated in less than human ways in many dimensions of our social life, including the legal system. With their decades-old inability to agree upon comprehensive immigration reform, not only do the legislative and executive branches of our government neglect to protect the dignity of hundreds of thousands of people every year,³ but they also fail to provide our country with the effective and humane tools it needs to better enforce its right to secure its borders. As a consequence, many of these brothers and sisters of ours are easy targets for international networks of human traffickers who depend on complicity and impunity to operate. Many immigrants who have established themselves in this country keep suffering from lack of access to public services, while we still benefit from their often underpaid work. Undocumented immigrants and refugees, who fled from terrible situations of poverty, violence or persecution, continue to be labelled as criminals, despite the often ignored natural “right of the family to a vital space”⁴ and to be reunited,⁵ which migration is supposed to fulfill.⁶ Meanwhile, they continue to contribute to the common good of our society with their God-given gifts.

5. In addition to immigrants, it is obvious how some ethnic groups are suffering more than others. It may be said that this is not directly due to

³ Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2241. At the URL:

http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENGO015/___P7W.HTM

⁴ Pope Pius XII, Apostolic Constitution “Exsul Familia,” Castel Gandolfo, 1 August 1952. At the URL:

http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/la/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-xii_apc_19520801_exsul-familia.html; Radio message on the 50th anniversary of “Rerum Novarum”, Vatican City, Pentecost, 1 June 1941. At the URL: http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/it/speeches/1941/documents/hf_p-xii_spe_19410601_radiomessage-pentecost.html.

⁵ Cf. Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 297-298. At the URL:

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html

⁶ Cf. Pope Pius XII, Op. Cit.

blatant acts of racism and segregation, but that would be hard to argue if we trace back the historic causes for them to have been left out of the economic progress of the nation. Unequal opportunities and services, stereotypes and prejudices, still tremendously affect the way African American communities are generally treated, as opposed to most people of western European descent. The same can be said about Native American groups, Hispanics and others. With respect to people of East Asian and Pacific Island heritage, during this time an increased number of them have been mocked, bullied and assaulted, both verbally and physically, and businesses owned by them have reported a sharper than average decline in patronage.⁷

6. The tremendous recession that the pandemic has caused further exposed grave deficiencies in our economic system. When the economy and finances become an end in themselves, idolatry of money thrives as greed and speculation grow. Virtual communication intensifies these evils, together with “the possibility of producing concentrated profits that are connected neither to production processes nor to the real economy.”⁸ As in past crises, those who are already disadvantaged are falling deeper into the vicious cycle of poverty and many in the middle class are experiencing scarcity, while others who were already more influential in the markets are encountering opportunities for more gain which for the most part is not being put at the service of the common good. Superfluous expenses and selfish eccentricities are a scandal when they coexist with rising

⁷ Cf. USCCB Public Affairs Office, Bishop Chairmen Condemn Racism and Xenophobia in the Context of the Coronavirus Pandemic, 5 May 2020. At the URL: <https://www.usccb.org/news/2020/bishop-chairmen-condemn-racism-and-xenophobia-context-coronavirus-pandemic>.

⁸ Pope Francis, address to the participants of the seminar “New Forms of Solidarity” organized by the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, Vatican City, 5 February 2020. At the URL: http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/es/speeches/2020/february/documents/papa-francesco_20200205_nuoveforme-disolidarieta.html

unemployment and lack of essential goods and services, especially at a time such as this.

7. Some people have taken advantage of the current confusion and misinformation to escalate the promotion of the gravely sinful and vicious businesses of abortion and euthanasia with cunning expediency. Due to complicit indifference, thousands of the most helpless members of our society are thrown away through abortion. Meanwhile, the violence, abuse, abandonment and decreased sense of self-worth that their mothers suffer are perpetuated under the guise of an alleged right to choose that violates the right to life of their unborn children and their own dignity.

8. It is also a scandal that through arbitrary arguments some lives are sacrificed for others, as some dispose of human embryos or use fetal cell lines taken from aborted babies for research purposes. Despite the physical size of the victims or how long ago they were sacrificed, these are abominable acts of violence even if they are committed in the quest of scientific breakthroughs such as the development of a much needed vaccine against COVID-19.

9. At the other extreme of their earthly existence, the elderly and the terminally ill are deprived of the natural end to their pilgrimage due to a lost sense of the meaning of life in their suffering, and because their treatments are considered too costly by people who care more about their own profit. At a time when we are most concerned about those most advanced in age and those with underlying health conditions, the

contradiction of that throw-away culture is quite symptomatic of a civilization whose soul is sicker than its body.

10. There are valid last resort actions with a double effect that result in an undesired loss of life, such as in some rare and extreme cases foreseen in the Catechism of the Catholic Church⁹, and the Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services of the USCCB.¹⁰ Those and other official documents, in consonance with the ancient tradition of the Church, confirm the teaching that it is never licit to purposefully pursue the end of a human life under any circumstance and for any reason whatsoever!

11. Saving lives is the obvious priority facing COVID-19, which poses tremendous challenges for everyone. While it is the responsibility of all to look after one another, it is eminently the role of public officials to enact policies that effectively place the dignity of human life above all else. Notwithstanding the fact that public affairs always entails the administration of insufficient resources, the proximity of our elections aggravates the temptation for elected officials to put their careers first by preferring to present appearances rather than the truth and pursuing self-interest rather than the common good, even hijacking to some extent the management of this crisis for selfish purposes. The current tendency to manipulate emotions – such as the exploitation of fear, despair, indignation and anger – through rhetoric, partial or false information plagued with unsubstantiated or ideologically motivated judgment, or the

⁹ Cf. 2263, 2278-2279, 2308-2309. At the URLs: http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENGO015/___P7Z.HTM, and http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENGO015/___P81.HTM

¹⁰ Cf. Sixth Edition, June 2018, 45.47-48. At the URL: https://www.usccb.org/resources/ethical-religious-directives-catholic-health-service-sixth-edition-2016-06_3.pdf

misrepresentation of virtues like compassion, has drawn public attention away from real problems and necessary policies, and has put the focus on carefully designed political narratives and characters. As a consequence, rather than being carefully examined for their character, thought and policies, political candidates and parties often become objects of belief, hope and reverence, which only belong to God. The resulting ideological invasion, polarization and lack of analysis, further divide our society, work places, families and even the Church.

12. There are other important problems that have drawn public attention during the last few months. Among them is the brutality of some police officers and its frequent connection with racism. Legitimate indignation has triggered demonstrations, which have been infiltrated by violent agitators and ideological agendas. In addition to that, we have witnessed the desecration and destruction of religious and historic symbols. All these serve as catalysts of a tendency turning our politics into a form of entertainment, rather than the art of achieving consensus to design and enact policies that effectively uphold human dignity and pursue the good of all.

An Existential Crisis

13. The last two centuries – which in the scope of human history is not a long time – have seen a dramatic transformation of our way of life, from agrarian societies, to industrialization, to the digital era. Although there are tremendous improvements, like an increased life expectancy, there are also new challenges, such as the increased cost of living, pollution caused by

transportation and energy consumption, time consumed in daily commutes and traffic, and parents having less time available to spend with each other and with their children, among many others. Furthermore, all of these relatively recent changes, combined with the new ways of communicating and prolonged use of digital devices, have led people in more recent years to have some kind of contact with more individuals and with more frequency than in any previous generation, but at a very superficial level, inhibiting relational abilities and reflection skills, especially among youth and children. The crisis of widespread indifference and relativism in our world, together with the superficial level of relationships, has generalized a loss of meaning of life and a lost sense of identity. As Pope Francis has explained, “The hearts of many people are gripped by fear and desperation, even in the so-called rich countries. The joy of living frequently fades, lack of respect for others and violence are on the rise, and inequality is increasingly evident.”¹¹

14. In one way or another the pandemic is affecting the whole world; the vast majority of people are undergoing emotional discomfort to some degree, impacting our behavior, affecting mental health, making our social life even less predictable and creating new tensions. Many sources of our natural sense of security have been shattered worldwide in the last few months. As the Pope has expressed, the pandemic has exposed “our vulnerability and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and

¹¹ Pope Francis, apostolic exhortation “Evangelii Gaudium,” 52. At the URL: http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html

priorities.”¹² Although a universal calamity or a pandemic are certainly not unprecedented, very few people alive remember such a disruption of our way of life on a global scale. There are undoubtedly some very unique challenges.

15. As we go through this time of exceptional unpredictability, we stand in solidarity with those who add to our shared anguish, their own aggravated hardships, including domestic violence, depression, excessive debt, failing businesses, homelessness, injustice, difficult and unwanted pregnancies, codependence, addiction, imprisonment, among others. As we all share the same human nature and the same God-given dignity, we are all called to share each other’s burdens as well as their joys. “We are in this together” is a common hope expressed these days.

A Crisis of Faith

16. People’s faith and even their very idea of God may be challenged when their world seems to crumble. Fear blocks reason and prevents action, it makes people unable to acknowledge truth and appreciate beauty; it banishes love. Since ancient times, people have tried to make sense of suffering and chaos by creating their own images of gods. We are all tempted, one way or another, to create a god in our own image and likeness, not realizing that we cannot save ourselves. It is certainly not the exception in our increasingly secularized and digitized world. Thus, many

¹² Pope Francis, extraordinary “Urbi et Orbi” blessing and moment of prayer, St. Peter’s Basilica, 27 March 2020. At the URL: http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/urbi/documents/papa-francesco_20200327_urbi-et-orbi-epidemia.html

false paths appear as a response to questions that arise from fear, such as: “Are we being punished?”, “Is this the end of the world?”, “Why does God allow this?” Discernment of the present situation under the guidance of the Holy Spirit may pose more relevant inquiries: How does our faith truly relate to this, to help us find peace and recover joy? How do God’s infinite mercy and unlimited power manifest themselves now? How can we allow ourselves to be encountered by God? How can we bring God’s consolation to others? How can COVID-19 be turned into an opportunity for our world to be better than before?

II. We Are in God's Hands

“Do not be afraid; just have faith.” (Mc 5:36)

17. The invitation to not be afraid, so often found in Sacred Scripture, may seem incoherent for someone who does not have the gift of faith. How can we not be afraid when our world as we have known it appears to fall apart? The answer is to cling to God. As blurred as our understanding may be in the face of suffering, God does offer a solution far better than the pointless fear-inspired desire to go back. The Father gives us the purpose for which he allows things to happen and for which he has created us. He “so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.” (Jn 3:16) Our encounter with God's Word Incarnate, Jesus crucified and risen, offers a bright new horizon, a new and overwhelmingly fulfilling meaning.

“The Lord does not disappoint those who take this risk; whenever we take a step towards Jesus, we come to realize that he is already there, waiting for us with open arms. Now is the time to say to Jesus: ‘Lord, I have let myself be deceived; in a thousand ways I have shunned your love, yet here I am once more, to renew my covenant with you. I need you. Save me once again, Lord, take me once more into your redeeming embrace.’”¹³

¹³ Pope Francis, apostolic exhortation “Evangelii Gaudium,” 3. At the URL: http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html

“Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light.” (Mt 11:28-30)

18. Once we have encountered the Lord, we will realize that our suffering matters so much to Jesus that he “participates in our pain to overcome it,”¹⁴ and to draw good out of evil, which only he can do. “He, more than anyone, cares about us.”¹⁵ “Giving his life for us, Jesus says to each one: ‘Your life is worth so much to me, that to save it I give all of myself.’”¹⁶ Jesus suffered as a consequence of the sins of all mankind for our suffering to have meaning in him, turning evil against itself. By suffering in his humanity the just punishment for the sins of mankind, he brought forth justice from mercy and accomplished justice in mercy in order to redeem us.¹⁷ Therefore, the normal course of nature and even our own freedom can never be an obstacle for God’s mercy. And that is how he reveals to us the worth of our eternal happiness, for which he prepares us by teaching us to walk along with him in times like this and throughout our entire lives, even making us sharers in his own mission.

¹⁴ Cantalamessa, Raniero, Fr., Sermon for Good Friday, St. Peter’s Basilica, 10 April 2020. At the URL: <http://www.cantalamessa.org/?p=3883&lang=en>

¹⁵ Pope Francis, extraordinary “Urbi et Orbi” blessing and moment of prayer, St. Peter’s Basilica, 27 March 2020. At the URL: http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/urbi/documents/papa-francesco_20200327_urbi-et-orbi-epidemia.html

¹⁶ Pope Francis, Regina Caeli, St. Peter’s Square, 22 April 2018. At the URL: http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2018/documents/papa-francesco_regina-coeli_20180422.html

¹⁷ Cf. St. John Paul II, encyclical letter “Dives in Misericordia,” 7. At the URL: http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30111980_dives-in-misericordia.html

19. When everything seems to go right and we feel safe and comfortable, the cross may be seen as a stumbling block or foolishness. (Cf. 1 Cor 1:23) A harsh time like this is actually an opportunity to get rid of any pretentiousness and allow ourselves to be encountered by the true God, revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

20. In the light of the Cross of Jesus we learn that in him truth and love are not opposed, like the world today would like us to believe, but they are one and the same. Jesus is the Word of God and God is love. (Cf. 1 Jn 4:8) We are called to be his disciples!

21. This is a good time to embrace the cross of our weakness and frailty, and open our hearts to the most merciful heart of God. It is a chance to let go of our false sense of security and look for ways to provide each other with the security of our embrace and God's mercy.

22. As he draws us to him, Jesus says: "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." (Mt 16:24-25) That is the way to discover that the strength of the Christian community is infinitely larger than the sum of our weaknesses. Christ is our rock!

"The Lord is my portion, I tell myself, therefore I will hope in him. The Lord is good to those who trust in him, to the one that seeks him; It is good to hope in silence for the Lord's deliverance." (Lam 3:24-26)

23. The joy of our encounter with Jesus grows roots in our hearts and fills them, setting us free from loneliness, emptiness, sorrow and sin. Although a despairing world might judge it as delusion, our Christian joy is possible in times like this in the form of an inner peace that has a potential to renew the face of the earth because it expands. “I am with you, to save and rescue you – oracle of the Lord.” (Jer 15:20)

He Strengthens Us

24. Saint Paul says: “We know that all creation is groaning in labor pains even until now; and not only that, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, we also groan within ourselves as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved.” (Rom 8:22-24) Being saved in hope means remaining vigilant, being ready through the “night”, staying awake with the “oil” of God’s grace, for we know neither the day nor the hour. (Cf. Mt 25:13) First and foremost, we are healed by his grace through the sacraments, given to us through the Church who is herself “the sacrament of Christ’s action at work in her through the mission of the Holy Spirit... they manifest and communicate to men, above all in the Eucharist, the mystery of communion with the God who is love.”¹⁸

25. Even as – after prayerful consideration and with the good of all in mind – I have temporarily suspended the Sunday Mass obligation in the Archdiocese of San Antonio,¹⁹ and reception of the sacraments is not as

¹⁸ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1118. At the URL: http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P31.HTM

¹⁹ Cf. Decree of 13 March 2020.

frequent as before the infection reached us, we must be aware that God “is not bound by his sacraments.”²⁰ Both St. Augustine²¹ and St. Thomas Aquinas taught that through spiritual communion the faithful truly receive the sacrament of the Eucharist spiritually.²² And the Church has traditionally taught that through an act of perfect contrition, together with the honest resolution to receive the sacrament of Reconciliation as soon as possible, sins are truly forgiven by God.²³

26. In addition to the sacraments, the Holy Spirit offers his help through prayer – especially the prayerful meditation of Sacred Scripture – as well as through the voluntary offering that we make to the Father, through the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, of the mortifications that we face.

27. Not only is God’s grace readily available for us at this time, but perhaps the circumstances to which the pandemic is forcing us can be used as opportunities to get to know ourselves, God and the people around us better, in new and different ways, as we grow spiritually. It is a paradox that now that many people cannot go out, we can make a trip inside ourselves. We need to find a time and a place that allows us a moment of silence. There we can, so to speak, look at ourselves from the outside and review how we relate to our environment; acknowledge what feeds or causes our emotions, feelings and affections; reexamine our ideas, prejudices,

²⁰ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1257. At the URL:

http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENGO015/___P3M.HTM

²¹ St. Augustine is cited by St. Thomas Aquinas: “Christ is to be eaten spiritually, as He Himself declares: ‘He that eateth My flesh and drinketh My blood, abideth in Me, and I in him.’” “De Verbis Domini”, Serm. CXLII, in Summa Theologica, Pt. III, Q. 80, Art. 2, Obj. 3, First Complete American Edition in Three Volumes, Benzinger Brothers, Inc., USA, 1947, Volume 2, P. 2487.

²² Cf. *Ib.*, Art. 1-2, P. 2486-2487.

²³ Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1452; Council of Trent, Sess. 14a, Doctrina de sacramento Paenitentiae, c. 4. At the URL: http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENGO015/___P4D.HTM

perceptions, assumptions, reactions and relationships. Finally, we can encounter ourselves and God. In this way we will find peace and a deep joy, beyond that which comes and goes with different situations. The Holy Spirit will transform us into a new creation and others might discover in us instruments that God sends. “I sought the Lord, and he answered me, delivered me from all my fears. ... Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the stalwart one who takes refuge in him.” (Ps 34:5.9)

We Must Trust Him

28. As he offers his help, the Lord demands trust because he has given us a trustworthy hope, rooted in his resurrection. He is the Good Shepherd who has traveled the path before us and so we can pray to him trustfully: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff comfort me.” (Ps 23:4)

29. “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Rom 8:31) The hope that he has given us is the breeding ground and the confidence that enables us to give of what we have. Speaking about the Apostles, Pope Francis said that “they set off: unprepared, yet putting their lives on the line. One thing kept them going: the desire to give what they received.”²⁴ We have been loved first and therefore we can give of what we have received. By giving, not only do we not lose anything of what we have been given, but we are given even more, “For to everyone who has, more will be given...” (Mt 25:29)

²⁴ Homily on the Solemnity of Pentecost, Vatican Basilica, 31 May 2020. At the URL: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200531_omelia-pentecoste.html

30. On one hand, for one who is ready it is irrelevant to know the day or the hour. On the other hand, one who lives in Christ longs to be with Him. (Cf. Phil 1:21-23) Difficulties like the current ones do have the power to remind us of our limits. At the same time, however, from the bottom of our hearts the Holy Spirit reminds us that we were made for eternity. Through this inner tension our faith reminds us that we are not God, that God has saved us and that we are awaiting the fullness of our salvation.

31. After his Ascension into Heaven, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to console and sanctify the disciples. The Holy Spirit immediately freed them from vain ambitions, cured them of their paralyzing fear, and sent them out into the world. He also helps us discern the signs of the times and transforms us into missionary disciples of Jesus, setting us in motion and sending us to do the Father's will. We are on a mission!

III. All Brothers and Sisters

“Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother, and sister, and mother.” (Mt 12:49-50)

32. As we are liberated by the Holy Spirit to participate in the mission of Christ, not only are we made collaborators, but we are transformed into members of his family. We are brothers and sisters in Christ, and so we are each other’s keepers.

33. Living one day at a time and following the Lord’s advice to “seek first the kingdom [of God] and his righteousness”, (Mt 6:33-34) many people are giving the best of themselves to serve others. Their example serves as an inspiration for the new world that is starting to emerge.

34. Many workers have run the extra mile to serve customers and honor the trust of those who hired them, contributing to maintain as much stability as possible. Business leaders everywhere are seen making great personal sacrifices for their employees rather than putting their focus on their own losses. Instead of serving themselves, many civic leaders are putting aside their own political gain to honor their position through the service of others.

35. Millions of immigrants have increased the amount of the remittances they send to their loved ones in their home countries. Mothers and fathers

have done all they can to protect their children and reduce the stressful impact they have experienced. Grandparents have made extra efforts to continue bringing their families together, even more now remotely, as it is unadvisable to do it physically.

36. The Church in San Antonio, as well as throughout the world, stands in solidarity and is indebted with gratitude to maintenance workers at medical facilities, emergency medical technicians and healthcare professionals who are selflessly and tirelessly giving themselves to patients, their loved ones and our whole community during this pandemic.

37. The examples of solidarity go on and on. We are proud of our Catholic school administrators, staff and teachers, who have adapted rapidly to new teaching and learning methods to continue to serve students and their parents. I thank God for the generosity of the staff and employees at the Pastoral Center, Catholic Charities, parishes, and every archdiocesan institution and agency, who continue to put the Lord and his People first, giving the best of themselves to be Christ's healing balm for everyone without distinction.

38. So many of our lay faithful, consecrated men and women, deacons and priests in our Archdiocese and throughout the world, have witnessed to the love of God with their apostolic zeal and their creativity in the last few months; taking advantage of technology and many other common resources; taking risks to reach out to people in new ways; bringing them closer to the Good News of Christ's healing power.

39. We are repeatedly amazed these days with displays of generosity and selflessness for the good of others. Abandoning themselves in God's hands everything falls into place for people of good will, as they grow in patience, hope and many other virtues, becoming instruments for the Holy Spirit to reign in our midst. A treasure is being stored up for them in heaven, which no one can destroy or steal. (Cf. Mt 6:20)

With Humble Gestures and Behaviors

“Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.” (Mt 25:40)

40. The life that God's love begets in us is meant to be life-giving for those around us and for the whole world. “For we are his handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for the good works that God has prepared in advance, that we should live in them.” (Eph 2:10) Solidarity shown for one person is soon passed on to the whole family and then to the community. Simple thoughtful acts done for others, like wearing a mask, keeping physical distance, or staying at home, are true forms of pursuit of the common good. They can be displays of true love as they save lives, even if the results are not immediately tangible or self-gratifying.

41. New forms of remote communication – like social media – which have often proven to harm our ability to relate to one another, are now serving as a tool to bring people closer and revitalize significant relationships, as we learn to care more for others. Such is the case for many children with their grandparents, as well as for those who are reaching out

to the vulnerable in our communities to provide effective relief. Some focus less on their loneliness or ailments, and others develop their relational skills, as both parts grow in love. New small online communities are emerging in different forms, nurturing the spirit of individuals and making everyone more engaged with each other.

42. As bothersome as it may be to change some habits, there are benefits that can be embraced willfully as a service to our neighbor and the common good. Telework, for example, takes more advantage of technology; helps reduce maintenance and travel costs; optimizes time; orients efforts to results and efficiency; promotes more autonomy and responsibility; motivates and generates engagement; deepens employer-employee trust relationships; while allowing better family-work reconciliation and a greater addition of female contribution to the workforce.

A Future Full of Hope

“I will resettle the cities and the ruins will be rebuilt. The desolate land will be tilled...” (Ez 36:33-34)

43. We should further reflect about how we need to change our habits, disciplines, attitudes, relationships, our social and civic life, and even our connection to the world, which is our common home. COVID-19 is offering us a learning opportunity for future situations that may arise, such as the potentially huge impact of climate change, about which there is a great degree of consensus. We have witnessed how “An admirable creativity and generosity is shown by persons and groups who respond to environmental

limitations by alleviating the adverse effects of their surroundings and learning to orient their lives amid disorder and uncertainty.”²⁵ And we have seen how human beings are “capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good, and making a new start, despite their mental and social conditioning... If we can overcome individualism, we will truly be able to develop a different lifestyle and bring about significant changes in society. An awareness of the gravity of today’s cultural and ecological crises must be translated into new habits.”²⁶ After God found his creation to be very good, he settled us in it “to cultivate and care for it.” (Gn 2:15) Enjoying the outdoors can provide a chance to contemplate the beautiful balance in God’s creation and to reflect on behavioral changes we must bring about to ensure the viability of our world for future generations.

44. True concern for our closest neighbor and even those that we will never meet – including future generations – will make us more aware that the whole human race shares the same destiny. A combined renewal of our social life may result from this time of pandemic as a consequence of overcoming tensions at home and rekindling family love. We can learn not to have strong opinions on matters about which we do not know enough, so that we can enrich each other’s views. This concern will be reflected in the way we inform ourselves and especially how we discuss current events. Our judgment when deciding our vote will become clearer as we ponder issues, proposed policies, and the character and competence of the candidates. Our elections will then prove to be less important than what we, the people, can

²⁵ Pope Francis, encyclical letter “Laudato Si,” 148. At the URL: http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

²⁶ *Ib.*, .205.208-209.

achieve by understanding each other better and working together to improve the quality of life of all.

45. Thus, our politics will be less a form of entertainment and an occasion for division, and more a way of growing in our love for humanity and an incentive to become more active participants in civic life; each one assuming their unique responsibility for the common good. This is particularly relevant for the laity who, “by their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God. ... They are called there by God that by exercising their proper function and led by the spirit of the Gospel they may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven.”²⁷

Furthermore, St. John Paul II reminded them that they “are never to relinquish their participation in ‘public life’, that is, in the many different economic, social, legislative, administrative and cultural areas, which are intended to promote organically and institutionally the common good.”²⁸

46. Once we have the navigation chart for Christ’s course, it is worthwhile leaving our sources of false security behind and, as it were, putting “out into deep water.” (Lk 5:4) And just as disruptions show how things are interconnected in ways beyond our imagination, so too our small acts of solidarity prove that love can truly transform the whole world for the better and bring the joy of having found the Lord closer to people. (Cf. Jn 1:41)

²⁷ St. Paul VI, dogmatic constitution of the Second Vatican Council on the Church “Lumen Gentium”, 31. At the URL: http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html

²⁸ Apostolic exhortation “Christifideles Laici”, 42. At the URL: http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_30121988_christifideles-laici.html

“Global interdependence calls for global answers to local problems”²⁹ and for local answers to global problems.

47. The world will never be the same, but that can be a good thing. Putting this time of trial to work can produce a harvest of more faith, hope and love in our communities. In a way, the harm that the virus does is more than overturned by the good done by love. And along the path of love, all the other virtues are planted and bloom like a garden in spring.

²⁹ Pope Francis, address at the Second World Meeting of Popular Movements, Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, 9 July 2015. At the URL:
http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/july/documents/papa-francesco_20150709_bolivia-movimenti-popolari.html

IV. With God’s Grace, Let Us Conquer this Challenge!

“I am not alone, because the Father is with me. I have told you this so that you might have peace in me. In the world you will have trouble, but take courage, I have conquered the world.” (Jn 16:32-33)

48. Although some foundational elements of our sense of security have been destroyed by COVID-19, so have some sources of our sinful pride. Therefore, as we reflect about what we want to recover and what we want to renew, we must do so with a desire to become more humble, in order to open the doors of our souls to the Holy Spirit, hoping to receive his gifts which we desperately need: “gifts that heal us and that make us healers, gifts that open us to new horizons, even while we are navigating the difficult waters of our time”³⁰. We need to leave behind the dead weight of attachment, whether it may be to spiritual worldliness,³¹ fixed ideas, desire of fame, appearance, material possessions, or anything else that could hold us stagnant. We must ask the Holy Spirit to grant us freedom of spirit, in order to loose ties and holdbacks that might prevent our souls from flying towards the supernatural and the divine. Since the battle against the spread of the virus is forcing us into an inner struggle, a good way to see the spiritual qualities on which we need to work is as “the warrior virtues,” to

³⁰ Pope Francis, address at the General Audience, Library of the Apostolic Palace, 5 August 2020. At the URL: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200805_udienza-generale.html

³¹ Cf. Pope Francis, apostolic exhortation “*Evangelii Gaudium*,” 93-98. At the URL: http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html

use Blessed Conchita Cabrera’s expression to describe a particular family of them.

49. First of all, the fortitude that we greatly need is not only a cardinal virtue that precedes many other virtues, but it is also a gift of the Holy Spirit; so we must pray for it humbly and constantly, as it is rooted in trust. So, the beginning of our “training” consists in trusting that our almighty God loves us more than we can even imagine, and that everything that happens has been either wanted or permitted by him in his infinite wisdom to fit his perfectly ordered plan for our salvation.

50. “I know well the plans I have in mind for you – oracle of the Lord – plans for your welfare and not for woe, so as to give you a future of hope.” (Jer 29:11) Hope will enable us to abandon ourselves in his hands and will allow us to work on our self-control, so that we can become more steadfast in our good purposes. Our activity as missionary disciples will then walk along with fortitude and steadfastness; and our integrity will be revealed, so that we can fight anything that might threaten to weaken it.

51. Then our religious ardor, animated by meaningful sorrow, will come to play. And fed by sacrifice and prayer, energy will sustain steadfastness. It will allow diligence to become an active fire-like love, fueled by the beating heart of apostolic activity to make Jesus known. An actively loving heart becomes devoted and embraces great endeavors. Following the example of St. John the Baptist, the main tools of our active love are the acceptance of humiliation and sacrifice, with the desire for the Lord to increase, as we decrease. As activity is enabled by sacrifice, it is born of love of God, and so

it is inseparable from generosity. An active love fears nothing, no matter how bitter, tough or difficult to achieve. Such activity is unstoppable and not even death can defeat it; because a soul that possesses such virtue communicates the Holy Spirit and does not look back on itself.

52. Active love ignites zeal for Christ's reign – a fire that consumes souls with a fervent desire of a greater glory of God and the salvation of neighbor. A zealous soul suffers terribly with the offenses committed against the Lord and his children, and there is no weariness or pain that can make it stop, even to the point of martyrdom.

53. All this spiritual gear will enable us to defeat any shallowness, feebleness, fickleness, indecisiveness, instability or hesitation³², and it will produce in us the fruits of the Holy Spirit, namely, charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control and chastity.

God Will Come to Our Aid

“We wait with endurance. ... We know that all things work for good for those who love God... What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will anguish, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword? ... No, in all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us. ... neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth,

³² Cf. Cabrera de Armida, Concepción, Blessed, “De las virtudes y de los vicios,” Editorial La Cruz, S.A. de C.V., Mexico City, 2006, Pp. 361-384.

nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom 8:25.28.35.37-39)

54. After having gone through horrific tests, Job expresses his trust in the Lord with these words: “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be hindered. ‘Who is this who obscures counsel with ignorance?’ I have spoken but did not understand..., but now my eye has seen you. ... Thus the Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his earlier ones.” (Job 42:2-5.12) Be certain that he will also bless our tomorrow, beginning in our hearts today!

55. We do not know exactly what God has in store for us, but our encounter with him already gives us enough understanding for the expectation of his kingdom to enlighten and drive our lives. While we wait and work for this crisis to be over, let us hope together not that this will just be an episode in history from which we recovered, but a turning point that we embraced allowing God to heal and transform each one of us, our Archdiocese and the whole world into something better. At least the difficulties that we are going through are well worth the effort and the hope. May we outgrow a deceptive sense of security for the certainty of being truly safe in God’s hands. With God nothing is lost! Our hope in the Lord sustains us!

We Have a Mother

56. As we strive to look ahead full of trust and hope, let us turn our hearts and our minds to Mary, the Spouse of the Holy Spirit. She is the one who allowed herself to be unconditionally led by the Holy Spirit of God to give flesh to the Son of God for our salvation. And Pope Francis has reminded us that, thanks to Mary's Assumption with her body and soul into heaven – at the end of her earthly mission – we know that in her “the goal has been reached and we have before our eyes the reasons why we journey: not to gain the things here below, which vanish, but to achieve the homeland above, which is forever. And Our Lady is the star that guides us. She went there first. She, as the (Second Vatican) Council teaches, shines ‘as a sign of sure hope and solace to the People of God during its sojourn on earth.’”³³

57. Mary is the most perfect being that the Father's love created for the Son. From his cross, at the zenith of affliction for him and his disciples, our Lord gave us his own Mother because he wanted us to experience the same maternal tenderness that he received as a human. She appeared to St. Juan Diego becoming the mother of all the people who would live in unity in the land that had recently been discovered for Christianity.³⁴ Our Lady of Guadalupe comforted him in his affliction. She did this not just for his own sake, but for all of us to experience the warmth of her embrace, the most precious expression of God's tender love for us:

³³ Angelus, St. Peter's Square, 15 August 2020, quoting “Lumen Gentium”, 68. At the URL: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2020/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20200815.html

³⁴ Cf. “Nican Mopohua”, 29-30.

“Listen: Put it into your heart, my little one and my dearest child, that the thing that frightened you, the thing that afflicted you is nothing. Do not let it disturb you. Do not fear this sickness nor any other sickness, nor any sharp and hurtful thing. Am I not here, I, who am honored to be your mother? Are you not under my shadow and protection? Am I not the source of your joy? Are you not in the hollow of my mantle, in the crossing of my arms? Do you need something more? Let nothing else worry you or disturb you.”³⁵

Let us address her, full of confidence as one people, united in our love for her Son, our Lord Jesus Christ:

³⁵ *Ib.*, 118-120.

**Our Lady of Guadalupe,
in these times of tribulation
we turn to you, O Mother.
See with compassion the suffering
of your beloved sons and daughters
affected by the coronavirus pandemic
throughout the entire world.**

**Ask your Son to have mercy on us
bringing healing to those infected,
strength to those in recovery
and protection to all your children.**

**Jesus Christ, Savior of all people,
grant us courage to accompany and
care for the entire world in the wake
of sorrow and uncertainty.**

**We seek refuge in you, and according to your
promise, deliver us from this danger. Amen**

St. Anthony of Padua, pray for us.



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Most Rev. Gustavo Garcia-Siller, MSpS
Archbishop of San Antonio

Most Rev. Michael J. Boulette, D.Min., V.G.
Auxiliary Bishop of San Antonio

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