



The world after Covid-19: a Christian contribution

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In a previous article, Frank Turner SJ mapped out the complex matrix of factors that decision-makers at all levels must take into account as they respond to the Covid-19 pandemic. Visions of the human person, and of a society that serves the good of all, which are informed by the Christian tradition can help to focus our attention and shape our language, individually and collectively.

As throughout the [previous reflection](#), what follows does not aspire to be exhaustive, but to focus on four perspectives that illuminate our current situation of pandemic: two key elements of Catholic Social Teaching; a perspective from Christian anthropology, in a recent essay drawing on the thought of Ivan Illich; and Pope Francis' recent commentaries on the pandemic.

Civil society

I have written sceptically about Yuval Noah Harari's confidence that 'citizen empowerment' could effectively counter the technological dominance of a totalitarian state. It remains true that a robust civil society is a necessary support for any democracy that is more than an 'electoral dictatorship' or a plutocracy. A strong, ramified civil society is also a fundamental element of resilience. Catholic Social Teaching consistently asserts the crucial role of civil society as a 'third sector' challenging any putative hegemony of either state or market. A useful summary of this teaching is found in the [Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church](#) (§293), which stresses 'self-organisation', initiatives 'characterized by forms of participation, cooperation and self-management that manifest the joining of energies in solidarity'. Their 'mark of distinction' as



an expression of faith is the special attention given to the relational components of the goods produced and of the services rendered in many areas: instruction, health care, basic social services and culture.

In the 'post-Covid world' we shall need the experience that we are more, politically speaking, than voters and taxpayers; more, economically speaking, than producers and consumers; and to know that as members of civil society (citizens or not) we are neither 'individuals' nor sectoral ideologues but persons in community.

The commons

One concept of growing importance is that of 'the commons'. A succinct account is given [in an article of 2016](#) by Jonathan Rowe, in the online journal *Evonomics*. Rowe argues that the impact of the global market has recently turned destructive. Its benefits are subject to systematically diminishing returns: time deficits rather than leisure, environmental despoliation. The market cannot conceive of moderating, let alone rejecting, the growth imperative. (In addition, the market typically confers rewards in a humanly reprehensible fashion.)

Ironically, perhaps, neoliberal, and at least some forms of socialist thinking, each put the market at the centre of their thought: one aspiring to 'set it free', one subordinating its operations to state control. For Rowe, the primary challenge is to defend and extend the commons. In addition to the 'natural commons' (land, water, air), Rowe identifies the 'social commons', such as libraries and parks (one might add open-source software).

The notion of the commons is by no means new. One leading theoretician, Elinor Ostrom, who died in 2012, was the first woman to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Economic Science in 2009. Her 1990 book *Governing the Commons* offers both complex theoretical models and empirical case-studies. Ostrom argues that the potential of 'common pool resources' can only adequately be realised 'beyond states and markets'. Historically, it was the growing dominance of government and the force of the market model which privatised the traditional commons: most famously in British history, through the personal or corporate appropriation of common land.

I discuss the commons here since its fundamental principle, that some goods must be safe from confiscation either by state officials or the wealthy (these categories not being mutually exclusive) is quite ancient. It finds a notable expression in Catholic Social Teaching's principle of 'the universal destination of the goods of creation', and is pithily described in [*Laudato si'*](#) (§93):

God created the world for everyone. Hence every ecological approach needs to incorporate a social perspective which takes into account the fundamental rights of the poor and the underprivileged. The principle of the subordination of private property to the universal destination of goods, and thus the right of everyone to their use, is a golden rule of social conduct and 'the first principle of the whole ethical and social order'. [This last phrase cites *Laborem Exercens*, John Paul II, 1981]

The Christian tradition has never recognised the right to private property as absolute or inviolable, stressing the social purpose of all forms of private property. Suddenly, as governments manage Covid, we have been astonished to realise that political will can halt the international economic order in its tracks, for a period of several months: this dramatic event gives hope that we need not return to the kind of 'economist' thinking that places 'the market' above the social purposes in which it is necessarily embedded.

Medicine and the human condition

The Canadian philosopher David Cayley has written [a searching essay](#) on the pandemic and its management, drawing on the later thought of Ivan Illich. In his famous book *Medical Nemesis* (1975), Illich posited two major watersheds in the advance of medicine. In a first wave of applied science, it brought profound human benefits, far outweighing any harms. Previously inconceivable treatments became possible, other procedures became much less agonising. Illich also cites the transforming achievements of public health, sanitation and safe drinking water, the availability of basic medicines for all (in some societies). For many this remains the only significant watershed.

But Illich proposes a deeply ambiguous second phase. Interventions may be excessive and generate more harm than good. *Medical Nemesis* focused on allegedly counterproductive interventions, coining the term *iatrogenesis* for illnesses arising from the health system (you can get sick in hospital, and sick from hospitals).

Illich went further, arguing that technological advances in medicine lead us to expect that all suffering can immediately be relieved. We can begin to see death as simply a failure or defeat, even as 'the obscene other', so becoming deluded about the human condition. We can know God, Illich would say, only as mortal creatures, aware of the difference between biological life and 'eternal life'.

In his later writings, going beyond *Medical Nemesis*, Illich argues that our very sense of being human is gradually being determined by the 'health system' considered as an absolute: not a means to a richer life but a central purpose of our lives. We become, as it were, lifelong patients. Thus, risk awareness is 'the most important religiously celebrated ideology today'. Risk calculations take populations in the aggregate, not persons: probability becomes the key. Genetic testing, for example, may decide the fate of a pregnancy on the basis of probability curves, and the mother is told what might happen to 'someone like her'. In Illich's view, to identify oneself with this statistical figment is to engage in 'intensive self-algorithmization'. In the case of Covid, Cayley reflects on the reification that we cannot avoid in opposing, for example 'saving the economy' and 'saving lives'.

Cayley comments that Illich was horrified by this development: 'For him what was at stake was the very character of human persons as ensouled beings with a divine origin and a divine destiny'. Instead Illich proposes 'a spirit of self-limitation', which he defined as 'courageous, disciplined, self-critical renunciation accomplished in community'.

Pope Francis

There recently appeared a collection of Pope Francis's addresses and letters, entitled [Life After the Pandemic](#). As one would expect he appeals to political leaders, proposing (without here arguing for) quite specific responses to the economic aspect of the crisis, though applicable beyond it, such as the universal basic wage. There must be no workers without rights. But what is most distinctive, and typical of Francis, is the breadth of his social awareness and his stress on the personal as well as the political. What other pope would have named among the prime victims of Covid those in thrall to loan sharks, the sellers of street newspapers (he can name them) and carnival workers? These are the people of the margins, the places where neither governments nor market solutions often reach.

Second is his esteem for 'popular movements', whom he chose to address on Easter Sunday itself. Harari speaks of 'citizen empowerment' and 'international cooperation'. For Francis it is the popular movements (understood to mean not just any sectional group, but grassroots groups that represent those on the peripheries of society) which are exemplary: at best they are an 'invisible army' pursuing their struggle through solidarity – without which there can be no adequate response to this crisis.

Third, we note his rejection of optimism. He writes of 'embracing the cross at this time'. Even in relative comfort we can become aware of the intrinsic poignancy in both personal conduct and public strategic choices. The necessary courtesy of physical distancing, for example, cannot avoid identifying our very friends and colleagues as existential dangers, even though we cannot do without them.

In some ways, too, Francis' concern for the human person echoes (whether consciously or not) the concerns of Illich as discussed above. One may think of Francis' remarks in his [interview in April](#) with Austen Ivereigh: 'I'm thinking, for example, of pre-natal selection. It's very unusual these days to meet Down's Syndrome people on the street; when the tomograph detects them, they are binned'.

Similarly, in [an address](#) given to European bishops in October 2017, Francis wrote as follows:-

Sadly, we see how frequently issues get reduced to discussions about numbers. There are no citizens, only votes. There are no migrants, only quotas. There are no workers, only economic markers. There are no poor, only thresholds of poverty. The concrete reality of the human person is thus reduced to an abstract – and thus more comfortable and reassuring – principle. The reason for this is clear: people have faces; they force us to assume a responsibility that is real, personal and effective. Statistics, however useful and important, are about arguments;

they are soulless. They offer an alibi for not getting involved, because they never touch us in the flesh.

Conclusion

Tragedy: In discussing the environment we noted unexpected social benefits accruing through lockdown. Naturally, it is invidious to speak blandly of 'good news'. The same UK lockdown has plunged an extra one million people into poverty and is thought to have led to [a rise in deaths linked to dementia](#), in April alone, of no less than 10,000. (The key point here is not the stunning statistic, but the desolate human reality underlying it.) The calculation of 'trade-offs' can become inhuman. And yet in public policy decisions, calculating trade-offs, 'triage', can never be excluded. Ethics itself does not become 'consequentialist' merely by realistically assessing consequences. We cannot erase the dimension of tragedy from human life.

Beyond economics: In [an interview with The Observer](#), the philosopher Bruno Latour pushes us beyond economics. Asked what he would change in society in the light of the pandemic he replies:

What we need is not only to modify the system of production but to get out of it altogether. We should remember that this idea of framing everything in terms of the economy is a new thing in human history. The pandemic has shown us the economy is very narrow and limited way of organising life and deciding who is important and who is not important. If I could change one thing, it would be to get out of the system of production and instead build a political ecology.

Latour here recapitulates a famous, enlightening argument of Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation*, first published in 1944. Polanyi observes that all societies are limited by the material conditions of their existence, so by economic factors. But 19th century free market thinking, 'chose to base itself on a motive only rarely acknowledged as valid in the history of human societies, and certainly never before raised to the level of a justification of action and behaviour in everyday life, namely, gain. The self-regulating market system was uniquely derived from this principle.' (p.31, 2001 edition)

A maxim of, I think, the 1980s proclaimed: 'Everything is political, but politics is not everything'. That motto can (and must) apply no less to economics, and for that matter, to 'religion'. The notion of 'integral ecology' becomes the necessary language of our epoch, as all disciplines, all crises, all persons, intersect to an indefinite and unlimited degree.

Laudato si' offers a summary, threefold account of our societal responsibilities in the face of the environmental crisis and, no less, of the pandemic:

- at the level of politics: governmental responsibility in seeking justice and in checking the false autonomy of markets, finance, technology;
- at the social level, the power of movements of solidarity, for the seeking of justice for the poor and for care of the earth;
- at the level of each person, to live in full and grateful consciousness of our dignity as agents who can choose what people, causes, objectives are worth our best attention and our service.

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