



Renewing Relationship

RETHINKING ENGAGEMENT IN GLOBAL HEALTH
DURING A PANDEMIC: FRANCISCAN PERSPECTIVES



INTRODUCTION

The global nature of the COVID-19 pandemic offers an unprecedented opportunity for those of us involved in global health to look at current philosophy and practice.

We've had a universal experience of isolation, of shortages, fear and new rules. How might those shared realities help us consider new ways to renew our solidarity with our partners in low- and middle-income countries and to assist us as we build something different through our global health strategies?

“The pandemic is a crisis and we do not emerge from a crisis the same as before: either we come out of it better or we come out of it worse. We must come out of it better, to counter social injustice and environmental damage. Today we have an opportunity to build something different,” said Pope Francis.*

In order to come out better, we will need to identify where breakdowns occurred when travel was banned and consider if new paths need to be created. Many public health and access challenges have become more evident, requiring lengthy research and analysis, but, overall, how do we emerge from quarantine with greater meaning and purpose? What are we learning from all that is happening amid this global pandemic?

The following essays are an offering to set the stage for collective consideration of how the complexities and challenges of the pandemic create an opportunity for us to rethink, reset and renew our global health relationships. While COVID-19 and the isolation we have experienced inspires more questions, they provide us with renewed hope and inspiration to do it better in the future. We hope you will take this time “apart” to reflect on our future opportunity to be brother and sister to our global neighbors.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bruce Compton". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

BRUCE COMPTON

*Senior Director, Global Health
Catholic Health Association of the United States*


*From Pope Francis' General Audience on Aug. 19, 2020.



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Rethinking Engagement in Global Health During a Pandemic: Franciscan Perspectives

BY FR. THOMAS NAIRN, OFM

 In his Message for World Mission Day 2020, Pope Francis stated that in light of “the suffering and challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic ... the invitation from God’s merciful heart challenges both the Church and humanity as a whole in the current world crisis. Like the disciples in the Gospel we were caught off guard by an unexpected, turbulent storm. We have realized that we are on the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented, but at the same time important and needed, all of us called to row together, each of us in need of comforting the other.” This “rowing together” is simply another way to express the virtue of solidarity, that (in the words of Pope John Paul II) “all are really responsible for all.”

In a variety of ways, depending upon local needs and resources, Franciscan friars throughout the world have shown that other virtues are needed to en flesh solidarity as we all row together for the common good. Franciscan responses to the pandemic have ranged from responding to immediate needs in the spirit of solidarity with the poor to a more systemic analysis of possible meanings of the pandemic in the light of Catholic social teaching and our Franciscan spiritual and theological tradition.

In this short essay, I will describe four Franciscan responses. While each of these examples is an expression of solidarity, each example also highlights a particular Franciscan virtue that builds up solidarity in that particular locale. Taken together, these virtues may offer a way forward in rethinking and re-engagement during and after this pandemic.

Philippines

In the Philippines, the pandemic began while the country was still responding to the Taal volcanic eruption and President Duterte had placed the country under a state of emergency, creating a situation where there was no work, no transportation and little food for the poor. Franciscans developed *Lingap Fransiskano* (Franciscan Aid) and opened their houses and parishes to the homeless and the poor. They also opened their friaries to medical personnel and to other frontline workers who risked bringing the virus from the workplace to their own homes. As Franciscans, they believe that they must be open to the prompting of the Holy Spirit and in the **spirit of minority** “respond to God’s call of serving the least, the lost and the last.”

Guinea Bissau

Franciscans in Guinea Bissau, East Africa, have worked to respond to local needs in practical and innovative ways through **collaboration**. Working in 30 villages, they have engaged youth volunteers to help in preventing the spread of the virus by going door-to-door to explain the pandemic to local residents. These volunteers provide practical assistance such as food, sanitizers, disinfectant agents and masks. With the friars, the volunteers also educate the local communities, for example, by means of posters instructing how people can avoid contagion. Such posters are especially important since much of the population cannot read. Through such collaboration, Franciscans are able to reach many more people than could have been achieved by the friars themselves.

United States

In the United States, the pandemic began as Franciscans were celebrating the fifth anniversary of Pope Francis's encyclical, *Laudato si'*, with its call for integral ecological conversion. Soon Franciscans found themselves in a perfect storm created by three crises: the ecological crisis described in the Pope's encyclical, a public health crisis created by COVID-19 and a social crisis in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd.

On the one hand, the pandemic has shown that there is, on the part of most Americans, an adaptability to crisis conditions and a willingness to adjust one's lifestyle in ways we

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would not have thought possible even a few months ago. On the other hand, each of these crises has been met with resistance and denial, with many seeing responses to the crises as another instance in the culture wars facing the United States.

As Franciscans in the U.S. have been reflecting on the inter-relation of the three crises and the social upheaval that they have caused, friars see themselves called to engage in *reconciliation*. Although we work toward international solidarity and the common good, we must also be healers who help all our sisters and brothers to be heard and respected and in turn, listen with respect to the other.

Germany

A Franciscan friar who is part of *Missionszentrale der Franziskaner* (Franciscan Mission Central) in Germany has developed a quite perceptive analysis of the situation in light of the Franciscan tradition. Using St. Francis' embrace of the leper as a template, he has suggested that "God's image changes as we face human misery and the fragility of life." He has challenged his fellow Franciscans to respond to the need for social distancing by envisioning new forms of responsible social closeness, care and solidarity.

Looking at the example of the early Franciscans, he notes that the social conditions of their time — poverty, disease and exclusion — led them to understand, in contrast, a

God who cares about all creatures and fosters life, who offers a gift of compassionate relationship that cannot be acquired through money or power. The current pandemic, he suggests, challenges us to rethink our social and economic relationships and should move us toward a sustainable economy, one that cares for all people, especially the poor. He calls upon political leaders to see that a future-oriented economy must be one that protects the poor and the balance of nature, for without such protection there can be no sustainability.

The Franciscan virtue of *patience* is needed to move this vision forward. For Franciscans, patience is not a passive virtue but rather the active force of perseverance and confidence in a difficult time when the end is not yet in sight. Patience keeps an eye on the glimmering light at the end of the dark tunnel and keeps one from paralysis and unnecessary panic. With patience, he believes, the world will not only overcome the current crisis, but also shape a future that is worth living for everyone.

Franciscans see that the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is a call to greater solidarity. We further believe, however, that it is through the virtuous practice of minority, collaboration, reconciliation and active patience that true solidarity and a more sustainable world order can come about.



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The current pandemic has highlighted our interdependence: we are all connected to each other, for better or for worse. Therefore, to emerge from this crisis better than before, we have to do so together; together, not alone. Together. Not alone, because it cannot be done. Either it is done together, or it is not done. We must do it together, all of us, in solidarity.

POPE FRANCIS

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