

The Pandemic and the Roman Catholic Church, Especially in Italy

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It is when the heart is under pressure that its true and deep commitments are exposed. When facing hardships, we reveal what is really important to us. In these months of the coronavirus emergency, the message that Roman Catholicism is giving is an alarming detachment from the basic principles of the biblical faith. This should come as no surprise. What is happening belongs to the core of Roman Catholic beliefs and practices as they are taught in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and as they are lived out in Roman Catholic parishes. However, given the favor with which even some Evangelicals view the self-styled “renewal” of Roman Catholicism and the action of Pope Francis, it is worth mentioning the spiritual regression we are witnessing in the midst of the pandemic crisis that severely hit Italy.

I. *Who Really Cares for the Country?*

After the outbreak of the coronavirus, at the peak of it, there was a flourishing of public dedications of Italy to *Mary's protection* (Pope Francis) and of Rome to the Madonna Salus Populi Romani, that is, the icon of Mary the pope is deeply committed to. The Archbishop of Milan dedicated the city to the Madonnina, the statue of the Virgin on the top of Milan's Duomo. In

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Venice, the local bishop, Patriarch Moraglia, dedicated his city to Our Lady of Health. In Naples, the archbishop of the city, Cardinal Sepe, dedicated the city to the care of San Gennaro, the protector and patron saint of the city. During the lockdown, in a deserted Rome, the pope walked the empty streets to the church of Saint Marcello to pray for the end of the pandemic. He did so in front of the “miraculous crucifix” that is kept there in memory of past miracles that supposedly happened through it.

Examples can be easily multiplied. Throughout the country, with these actions of devotions to Mary and the saints, Roman Catholicism has shown what pillars remain stable and reliable when everything else trembles: the maternal care of the Madonna and the intercession of the saints. The explicit message that was communicated was that Mary and the saints are always “near” to those who suffer, always at hand and ready to intervene. This explosion of Marian devotions culminated in a *nationally broadcast rosary* (i.e., a Marian prayer) led by the pope himself, where the deep unbiblical commitments of Roman Catholicism were again on display.¹

The question that needs to be asked is this: If when in trouble we have to look for help through human mediators, where is Jesus Christ in all this? Is Jesus Christ not alive and powerful to intercede for us (Heb 7:25)? Is the Holy Spirit not fully active and interested in being involved in our intercession (Rom 8:26)? Is the Father not attentive to our prayers (e.g., 1 Pet 3:12) and ready to act upon them? With the flurry of all these Roman Catholic devotions, it is as if the Triune God is sleeping and in need, like the Baal in Elijah’s time (1 Kgs 18), to be awakened by human mediators.

II. *Puzzling Interviews*

The second area of perplexity has to do with two public statements by Pope Francis. He was interviewed by two Italian newspapers on two almost consecutive days. To *La Repubblica* (March 18, 2020)² he unveiled a concentration of humanism and universalism. Without ever speaking of Christ or of the sin and salvation that is received by repenting and believing in him, he gave voice to something that does not even resemble the biblical gospel.

¹ “Praying the Rosary with Pope Francis,” YouTube, May 30, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ilIkQyWaXzM>.

² Paolo Rodari, “Pope Francis on Coronavirus Crisis: ‘Don’t Waste These Difficult Days. While at Home Re-discover the Importance of Hugging Kids and Relatives,’” *Repubblica*, March 17, 2020, https://www.repubblica.it/vaticano/2020/03/18/news/coronavirus_pope_francois-251572693/.

When asked, “How can those who do not have faith have hope in days like these?” he answered, “They are all God’s children and are looked upon by him. Even those who have not yet met God, those who do not have the gift of faith, can find their way through this, in the good things they believe in: they can find strength in love for their children, for their family, for their brothers and sisters. One can say: ‘I cannot pray because I do not believe.’ But at the same time, however, he can believe in the love of the people around him, and thus find hope.”

“We are all children of God”; we can believe in the “good things” we believe in, these “things” being love for our own dear ones; we can “believe in the love of people around” us and “find hope in it.” These are not statements stemming from the biblical gospel but from a man-centered message. The pope had millions of readers, and he spread a message that reinforced them in whatever they believed rather than presenting the gospel.

Then, in an interview with *La Stampa* (March 20, 2020), the pope once again reiterated that “we are all children of God” and that, after the crisis is gone, we have to restart our life by re-appreciating our “roots, memory, brotherhood and hope.”³ This too is a humanist and universalist message devoid of any gospel meaning centered on Jesus Christ and the need for repentance and faith. The readers (millions of them) are left with the conviction that whether or not they believe in whatever they believe, they are all right before God. No one is challenged to face the coronavirus crisis by repenting and trusting Christ alone, who saves and heals.

III. *Outpouring of Indulgences*

The climax reached by Roman Catholicism in times of pandemic is the *granting of plenary indulgences* to “the faithful suffering from Covid-19 disease, commonly known as Coronavirus, as well as to health care workers, family members and all those who in any capacity, including through prayer, and care for them.”⁴ An indulgence is a remission of the temporal sin administered by the Roman Catholic Church on the basis of the merits of the saints. Practically, it is a “work” that needs to be done in order to receive a benefit from the church. The whole of the indulgence system denies that we

³ Domenico Agasso Jr., “Coronavirus, Papa Francesco: ‘Non abbiate paura,’” *Stampa*, March 30, 2020, <https://www.lastampa.it/vatican-insider/it/2020/03/20/news/coronavirus-papa-francesco-non-abbiate-paura-1.38613733>.

⁴ “Decree of the Apostolic Penitentiary on the Granting of Special Indulgences to the Faithful in the Current Pandemic,” vatican.va, March 20, 2020, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/03/20/200320c.html>.

are forgiven of our sins by God himself through the sufficient and complete work of Christ. Martin Luther and the whole Protestant Reformation strongly opposed indulgences, rightly seeing them as a denial of the gospel.

The pope offered an outpouring of this medieval practice even to those who will listen to a *special vigil of prayer* (live from TV sets, the internet, etc.) that happened on March 27, 2020, where he imparted a special blessing.⁵

The most recent offer of indulgences is related to the year that Pope Francis inaugurated on December 8, 2020, to celebrate Saint Joseph, the legal father of Jesus. “During this period, the faithful will have the opportunity to commit themselves with prayer and good works, to obtain, with the help of Saint Joseph, comfort and relief from the serious human and social tribulations that besiege the contemporary world today.” Moreover, “Everyone who entrusts their daily activity to the protection of St. Joseph, and every faithful who invokes the intercession of St. Joseph so that those seeking work can find dignifying work can also obtain the plenary indulgence.”⁶

The basis of the Catholic Church teaching its members to call for the help of Saint Joseph, Mary, and the saints is twofold. On the one hand is a weird interpretation of what is proclaimed in the Apostles’ Creed in article 9: “We believe in the communion of the saints”; for Catholics, that “communion” is extended to the dead and allows communication with them through prayers and petitions addressed to them. On the other hand is the Catholic view of the saints who, because of their heroic witness, can be “mediators” between God and humanity. Both teachings are biblically wrong: our fellowship with those who have preceded us in glory is spiritual until the resurrection comes, and we are never commanded to pray to the dead. It is actually forbidden by Scripture to have anything to do with the realm of the dead (Deut 18:10–12). Further, we have a living and loving intercessor in the person of Jesus Christ who perfectly hears our prayers (Heb 4:15–16) and who is perfectly qualified to be the only mediator between God and us (1 Tim 2:5). If we do not know what to pray and how to pray, we have the Holy Spirit, who helps us to pray (Rom 8:26).

⁵ Devin Watkins, “Covid-19: Pope Offers Prayer to Virgin Mary for Protection,” *Vatican News*, March 11, 2020, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-03/pope-francis-prayer-our-lady-protection-coronavirus.html>.

⁶ “Apostolic Letter *Patris Corde* of the Holy Father Francis on the 150th Anniversary of the Proclamation of Saint Joseph as Patron of the Universal Church,” Vatican.va, December 8, 2020, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco-lettera-ap_20201208_patris-corde.html.

IV. *What Is at Stake*

Indulgences are a medieval invention that has nothing to do with Scripture. They stem from a work-based view of salvation wherein we must do something to have our sins removed from us (e.g., reciting certain prayers, making certain pilgrimages, crossing the holy doors, and in the past paying an amount of money to buy them). They derive from a faulty view of the Roman Church, which claims to administer God's grace by way of opening up the "treasury of merits" earned by the saints and making them available on special occasions. There is no Scriptural support for either claim. The forgiveness of our sins is a gift that comes to us by grace alone and is grounded in the accomplished work of the Lord Jesus Christ who has paid the full penalty for our sins (1 John 2:1–2). Thanking God, we can go directly to the Father's throne in the name of the Son and by the power of the Holy Spirit. Somehow, we should keep on nailing up the Ninety-Five Theses; they are as relevant today as they were in 1517.

What future can Italy have with such a message coming out of Rome? Because of these deceptions, the need for a robust, biblical witness is as relevant as ever. The "renewal" that Roman Catholicism is going through will not make it change according to the Word of God. It will empower it to inoculate people with words that may appear close to the good news but are, instead, nowhere near the biblical gospel. In addition to the health emergency of the pandemic, we are living in a time of even greater spiritual emergency.