

Emergency What we need is to tap into the people who embody this victory. It is not difficult, because in times like these, such people are so uncommon, they stand out

THIS IS HOW WE LEARN TO CONQUER FEAR IN TIMES OF DIFFICULTY

By **Julián Carrón**

Dear Editor,

Moved by your invitation to “turn a new page, facing this public health emergency in a careful, serious and responsible way” (*Corriere della Sera*, February 28, 2020), I would like to offer a contribution for reflection.

Often, we live as if we were in a bubble, which makes us feel safe from the buffets of life. That way, we allow ourselves to go on in life distracted, pretending that we can control everything. Sometimes, however, circumstances spoil our plans and send us the rude awakening to take ourselves seriously and rethink what our situation in life really is. In recent days, reality has torn apart our more or less peaceful routine by taking on the threatening face of Covid-19, a new virus, which has caused an international health emergency. Paradoxically, however, precisely the challenges that reality does not spare us can become our greatest allies, because they force us to look more deeply at what it means to be human. Situations as unpredictable as the present one awaken us from our torpor, snatching us out of the comfort zones in which we were comfortably planted. This reveals what kind of progress we—each of us personally and all together—have made on the path of maturity, how much self-awareness we have gained and how capable we are of facing the life in front of us. All our ideologies, big and small, and our convictions, including religious ones, are put to the test. The crust of a false sense of security shows its cracks. Everyone, without distinction, is called into question and better understands who he is.

On such occasions, we understand that “the subject’s power lies in the intensity of his self-awareness” (Giussani), or in the clarity with which he perceives who he is and what makes life worth living, because the enemy we find before us is not so much coronavirus as it is fear. A fear always in the back of our minds that explodes when reality exposes our essential powerlessness, for many people, taking over and, at times, prompting impulsive reactions: pushing us to close ourselves up, shy away from any contact with other people to avoid contagion, stock-piling provisions “in case they could be needed,” etc.

Over the last few days, we have witnessed both the spread of an individual and collective irrationality and hurried attempts to propose a remedy, all aimed at getting out of this situation as fast as possible. Each of us must say for himself, observing all that is happening within and around him, which attempts are really capable of addressing the problem and overcoming the fear, and which, instead, just make it worse.

This is the value of every crisis, as Hannah Arendt teaches us: they “force us to return to questions,” they bring out our “I” and all of its need for meaning. There is a deep connection between the relationship we have with reality and our human self-awareness: “If an individual were to barely live the impact with reality, because, for example, he had not had to struggle, he would scarcely possess a sense of his own consciousness, would be less aware of his reason’s energy and vibration” (Luigi Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, p. 100). The question that arises right now, more powerfully than any other, is, “What can conquer our fear?”

Perhaps the most elementary experience available to us to answer that question is that of a child. What conquers a child's fear? The presence of his mother. This "method" applies for everyone. It is a presence, not our strategies, our intelligence or our bravery, that propels and sustains each of our lives. But we must ask ourselves, what kind of presence is capable of conquering the deep fear that grips us at the depths of our being? Not just any presence. This is why God became man, why He became a historical, embodied presence. Only the God who enters history as a man can conquer that deep fear, as the lives of his disciples have testified (and continue to testify). "Only this God saves us from being afraid of the world and from anxiety before the emptiness of life. Only by looking to Jesus Christ does our joy in God come to fulfillment and become redeemed joy" (Pope Benedict XVI, *Homily*, Regensburg, September 12, 2006). These affirmations are only believable if we see people whose lives, here and now, show the signs of God's victory, of His true and contemporaneous presence, and therefore a new and different way of facing circumstances, one full of hope and an otherwise unimaginable joy that is channeled into an indomitable industriousness.

What we need, therefore, more than any reassuring speeches or moral instructions, is to tap into the people who embody the experience of *this* victory, that there is a meaning in life proportionate to the challenges. Nothing could be simpler, because in times like this, when hysteria dominates, people like this are so uncommon that they stand out. All the rest is useless. Recently, when a prominent figure asked a group of young people, "Aren't you afraid of becoming adults, of growing up?" one young man immediately replied, "No! Looking at the faces of certain adults who are with us, looking at the way they live, what do I have to fear?"

It is only when a well-founded hope prevails that we are able to face our circumstances without running away, to truly broaden our reason and relate to danger and risk in a rational and balanced way, using fear (in the most instinctive and understandable sense of the word) as a resource. Otherwise, we will end up either reacting impulsively or seeing everything through the restricted lens of our rationalistic measure, which, in the end, is totally incapable of freeing us from fear and helping us get back to living. There is, then, perhaps no more critical task than tapping into those presences in whom we see an experience of the victory over fear in action. With them, wherever we find them, it will be easier to begin again, waking ourselves up from the nightmare into which we have fallen and rebuilding, thread by thread, a social fabric where suspicion and fear of coming into contact with others are not the last word. Then, even the economy will be able to regain steam.

What an opportunity this circumstance we are living could become! An opportunity you do not want to miss.

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