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## Lord what must we do? (Mark 10:17)

9-11 minutes

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*Joint Pastoral Message on Covid-19 to Teachers, Educators, Seminary Professors and Seminarians and the Catholic faithful at the opening of the school year*

Brothers and sisters in Christ:

In the midst of the pandemic agitating us to restlessness and fear, we greet you “*Peace be with you*”.

We are going on a stormy journey and our boat seems too fragile for the strong winds.

*Jesus was in the stern, asleep on a cushion. They woke him and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” He woke up, rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Quiet! Be still!” The wind ceased and there was great calm. Then he asked them, “Why are you terrified? Do you not yet have faith?” (Mark 4:38-40)*

It is His peace, His assurance, His power that we need right now. In you our students and seminarians, we can read the questions of your heart “*What must we do?*”

### **STRUCK DOWN BUT NOT DESTROYED**

As a people, we have all suffered a lot from almost five months of lockdowns. Fear of illness and death surround us. Our basic freedoms have mostly vanished. Over two million of us have lost our jobs and over 93,000 businesses have closed down or

severely restructured. Our economy plunged 16.5%, losing P1.5 trillion a month, and is in technical recession, the first since 1991. We have an epidemic of depressions and increasing reports of suicides. We are being asked to allow all these as the “new normal”.

We need to discern the truth behind the appearances of seeming unstoppable increasing infections. We must make appropriate decisions on the basis of this truth. We shall then be free from the massive ills that are gnawing at our nation, our collective soul and affecting our faith in God.

What is the Lord telling us? We grope for meaning. The search for meaning and purpose is the great need of our time. Our hope is in the Lord but we need clarity of purpose and certainty of direction from our leaders in this stormy journey. We deplore the marginalization of religious values in the programs to fight this pandemic. The Covid-19 program must be rooted in ethics, an ethics which is people-centered.

*“The exclusion of religion from the public square hinders... collaboration for the progress of humanity. Public life is sapped of its motivation and politics takes on a domineering and aggressive character.”* (Caritas in Veritate, 56).

## **MY SHEEP HEAR MY VOICE**

We are making these Gospel appeals to you as shepherds so that we may respond to this pandemic with the eyes of faith, with the heart of charity and with the armor of truth.

Our first call is to ourselves. God has given us a very powerful defense system within our bodies to deal with all kinds of pathogens including viruses. This defense capability is called the natural immune system with its innate and adaptive capacities. It is our responsibility to ensure that we nurture and make full use

of our God-given immune system. With Pope Francis, we can declare that I am vaccinated by the precious blood of Jesus Christ. No virus can touch me.

We call for circles of study and discernment within our faith communities. We need to be critical and discerning against the many false narratives prevalent in media and the many unscientific unreasonable public policies. Once you understand the issues better, find creative ways to be active in bringing a solution in the light of the Gospel. This is our Christian social responsibility.

We also call on Catholic colleges and universities and their research offices to make sure that scientific studies about COVID-19 are widely shared in the general public using reason, science and Catholic social teachings. Although medicine is not our expertise in seminaries, let us drink from the well of Catholic social teachings how to face this worldwide pandemic. These will give our countrymen an access to the truth that will free them from baseless fears and unnecessary anxieties.

We encourage our Catholic communications networks to disseminate a holistic perspective about the epidemic and encourage responsible and reasonable voices to be heard, even if these are contrary to the prevailing narrative. We must hold on to and protect our freedoms of thought, movement, speech, and assembly.

## **CALL TO PRAYER**

We also invite all to a collective prayer action to lift the lockdowns and help heal the nation. God always listens and nothing is impossible with Him. Pope Francis said in March “*We are not self-sufficient; by ourselves we flounder: we need the Lord, like ancient navigators needed the stars. Let us invite*

*Jesus into the boats of our lives. Let us hand over our fears to him so that he can conquer them. Like the disciples, we will experience that with him on board there will be no shipwreck. Because this is God's strength: turning to the good everything that happens to us, even the bad things. He brings serenity into our storms, because with God life never dies“.*

We appeal for a massive and nationwide campaign for TEN HAIL MARY'S DAILY, in our schools and seminaries, parishes and communities, starting August 15 the Solemnity of the Assumption until September 15, the feast of Our Lady of Sorrows to be prayed at 12:00 noon wherever you may be.

### **TO THE NATION AND TO SOCIETY**

To all our brethren who share our concern for the nation and the world even if we do not share a common Christian faith, we also make these appeals.

We plead with our friends in media to balance their coverage of the COVID-19 crisis. The science and facts have evolved away from the original narrative that caused and surrounded the lockdowns. Be truly independent and fearless. Follow the truth wherever it may lead.

We call on government officials to be more open to the new scientific insights and global experiences around COVID-19, even if these may challenge one's belief systems and preferred approaches to managing the epidemic. Let us learn from the success stories of our ASEAN neighbors with political humility and collective honesty. We appeal to the IATF for a more participatory approach that is open to the wisdom and experience of various professionals, scientists and physicians as well as genuine and constructive representatives of business, civil society, and local government units.

The nation understood that the government had no choice five months ago but to roll out extreme measures of quarantine to protect the lives of its citizens from a little-understood threat. Continued endless lockdown is unnecessary given the declining and comparatively insignificant death rates and faulty tests. A cure for COVID-19 is already available. Dozens of countries around the world have lifted their lockdowns and schools have opened.

We appeal for the upgrade of the capacity of hospitals and rationalize the use of limited hospital spaces. Be more precise in targeting who should receive priority in hospital care. Focus our strategy in protecting the most vulnerable sectors of society including the senior citizens and people threatened with other morbidities. More than anyone else, we bow in homage and gratitude to our medical front liners who have laid down their lives that others may live.

We plead to parents and teachers to attend to the special needs of our children under these extraordinary times. Our children will be children only for a few years. Let us insure their balanced growth and formation of the mind, body and soul. They need sufficient physical activities, enough sleep and right nutrition. Their neural, mental, emotional, and social development are primary. There is a bigger and brighter world beyond the virtual world that our children have been accustomed to during the lockdowns.

## **RESIST THE CULTURE OF DEATH**

The long shadows of death have fallen upon our country. The summary execution of the defenseless poor, the violence against women and children at home and in public life, the reckless tampering of our nation's ecological balance, the

puzzling unabated increase of illegal drugs, the unsolved plunder of public funds, the glorification of contraception and abortion, the growing number of jobless and hungry families, the erosion of basic courtesy and respect and the numbness to the vulgar —the long shadow of death is cast upon our land. This is a regime of death and darkness seems to be enjoying its fine hour.

Refuse to get discouraged. Rise up to hope in the Lord. With firm faith we declare “*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.*”

Sincerely yours,

+SOCRATES B. VILLEGAS

Archbishop of Lingayen-Dagupan

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