

The most effective prophylaxis: solidarity and mutual help.

More than counting the days, you need to make every day count

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In recent decades, especially in the richest western countries, mankind has felt increasingly "powerful", that is, equipped with scientific knowledge, technological means and economic resources, which allow to intervene incisively on nature, on men, on social systems. All production processes, social relationships, pace of life have undergone a strong acceleration: communication is getting faster and faster, people's movements are quick and massive, "globalization" has interconnected everything and everyone. But in recent months, power and speed have stopped: a tiny virus, coming from afar, has stopped us. The SarsCoV2 virus, responsible for the Covid-19 epidemic, suddenly and dramatically reminded us that the human being is fragile, vulnerable, mortal. With fatigue and suffering, we have regained awareness of these characteristics of the human condition. A virus that cannot be heard or seen but is transmitted by breathing, through close contacts, and is now spread all over the world, is threatening our health, resulting in loss of life, seclusion at home, social distancing, economic and social crisis.

I wouldn't call it a war, even if military metaphors are frequently used; but we are experiencing something similar to what happened in 1986 after the serious Chernobyl nuclear accident. However, we are now even more "suspended" in time and matter: we rely on online "contacts", we live day by day having a hard time thinking and planning the future, we look to science and medicine in search of answers that they aren't able to give, or that seem uncertain and confused. There would be many reflections about the current situation, both personal and collective, that each of us handles with different ways of reacting, thinking, looking to the other people and to the future.

Restoring humility and solidarity

It will be important, as soon as possible, to reflect at all levels on what happened, on the lived experience, on how to face the social and economic challenges in times of recovery and return to normalcy. What are we learning from this epidemic? Certain outlooks on life and ways of organizing society need a thorough review, reducing a general claim to "dominance" that everyone had. Even science, medicine, technology, had to admit (with some difficulty) that they could not explain anything, give useful

and consistent indications, solve any problem. The firmly established logic of always supporting competitiveness and encouraging rivalry in all areas of social life, in order to achieve quick results imposed by the model of having everything at once, revealed all its fragility and dangerousness in the course of a serious threat to public health, as in the case of a pandemic. Greater humility by all and more collaboration between scientific world, health professionals, politicians, economists, communication experts, religious institutions, could help us manage in a better way similar emergencies in the future, but above all outline real prevention measures presently. Solidarity and mutual help should become the real “prophylaxis” to avoid and/or reduce the impact of such pandemics. Moreover, a deep rethinking of our relationship with nature is needed, with the relative changes in development models, for an "ecological cure" of the environment, which is more exploited and abused than it is respected and cultivated. The development of a "global bioethics" appears increasingly urgent to overcome an individualistic and technological/specialized conception, to seek a global view of the health determinants for a global cure. We're all in this together, as Pope Francis recalled, overwhelmed by the storm, and only together can we save ourselves. We could also rediscover a more spiritual and religious dimension of life, calling upon God, the only Lord who gives salvation and hope, and helps us in the common efforts to cure and support each other in "navigation" of life.

Health systems, public health and ethical responsibilities

Health is a personal and common good, which calls for a strong public commitment to develop structures and services adapted to the needs, using the economic and human resources available according to criteria of efficacy and justice, with priority attention to territory and prevention. It is a question, then, of including those moral values that must guide health policies to use limited resources well, according to ethical principles of benefit, justice, solidarity; avoiding discrimination and a purely utilitarian and efficiency-driven logic. We therefore need to better define priorities and urgent matters in terms of health, organization of services, preparation and support for health workers, often put to the test, like in these days but also in more ordinary conditions. The modality of governance, in usual and emergency situations, must be better developed. Pandemics call for a public health system integrating responses from hospitals, territory, health and political authorities, population and mass media. There are already competences and triage protocols elaborated a long time for local or global epidemics and for situations of serious emergency, such as major catastrophes (earthquakes, floods ...). The current emergency is highlighting in our country neglected problems and issues, weak points of a healthcare system that has inspiring principles of great ethics and civilization (universality, solidarity, uniformity), but has been affected by political and organizational choices that compromised some results. In certain contexts,

also given the risk of a "fragmentation" of the system for a badly managed regionalization, little investment has been provided for the community, the public health, that is, prevention, healthy lifestyles, pollution abatement: to take better care of the environment and the community means to take better care of people. And vice versa, that is, to promote personal lifestyles and treat people quickly and rightly means to have a healthier community. Medicine and healthcare have been increasingly focusing on short-term/mid-term results, on advanced technological investment, on specialized and sectoral services, neglecting the interventions on the territory and a better organization of basic medicine and epidemiology. It is a complex matter, with different levels of responsibility, but it will have to be taken up again for the future. In serious emergency conditions, with limited resources in the face of growing needs, such as the pandemic of Covid-19 in reference to the lacking beds in ICU, you can face dramatic and lacerating medical decisions, involving ethical criteria and particular organizational responsibilities. The note of the Pontifical Academy for Life of 30 March 2020, "Pandemic and Universal Fraternity", expresses itself in this regard: "At that point, after having done everything possible on an organizational level to avoid rationing, we'll always have to bear in mind that the decision cannot be based on a difference in the value of human life and dignity of each person, which are always the same and priceless. The decision instead concerns the use of treatments in the best possible way according to the patient's needs, i.e. the severity of their illness and their need for treatment, and the evaluation of the clinical benefits that the treatment can achieve in terms of prognosis. Age cannot be taken as sole and automatic selection criterion, otherwise it could lead to a discriminatory attitude towards the elderly and the most vulnerable. It is also necessary to formulate as much as possible shared criteria based on sound arguments, to avoid arbitrariness or improvisation in emergency situations, as disaster medicine taught us ... The search for treatments as equivalent as possible, the sharing of resources, the relocation of patients are alternatives that must be carefully considered, in the logic of justice. In any case, never must we abandon a sick person, not even when any treatment has proved ineffective: palliative care, pain relief and accompaniment on the journey towards death are exigencies not to be overlooked".

Conclusion

I think we should all develop a "supplement of wisdom" that allows us to learn from the lived experience and to reorganize healthcare according to principles of solidarity and collaboration. Maybe that will be our most effective "antivirus" capable of activating the resources of science but also those of people, of our feelings, of our common commitment to help and cure each other, to correct certain aspects of society. In his flash volume "During the contagion" (Einaudi, Turin 2020), Paolo Giordano

concludes as follows: "In Psalm 90 there is an invocation that often comes to my mind in these hours: "Teach us to count our days and we will acquire a wise heart. " Maybe it occurs to me because all we do is count. We count those infected and those healed, we count the dead, we count the hospitalizations and the missed school mornings, we count the billions gone on the stock exchange, the face masks sold. And above all we count and recount the days, especially those that separate us from the end of the emergency. However, I have the impression that the Psalm wants to suggest a different calculation: it might teach us to count our days to give value to our days. To all of them, even those who may seem only a painful interval. We can tell ourselves that Covid-19 is an isolated incident, a misfortune or a scourge, we can shout that the fault is all theirs. Otherwise, we can make an effort to attribute a meaning to the current contagion. We can make better use of this time, we can use it to think what ordinariness prevents us from thinking: how we got here, how we want to recover. Let's count the days, acquire a wise heart, not allow all this suffering to pass in vain ».