

America Interview

Why was it important to issue a document on human fraternity during the COVID-19 pandemic?

1. There were two main reasons for this. First of all, experience shows how interconnected we are with each other, so it is immediately clear how much each person's behavior affects others. "...for better or worse, the consequences of our actions always fall on others as well as on ourselves. There are no individual acts without social consequences. This applies to each individual, and to each community, society and population center." But this fact needs to be clarified because such a situation can create distances between us: "We are living painfully a paradox that we would have never imagined: to survive the disease we must isolate ourselves from each other, but if we were ever to learn to live isolated from one another, we would quickly realize how essential for our lives is life with others." (Note) Even our language reflects this tension. We talk about "social distance," but we can't really create distances that are social. At most, we're dealing with a physical distance of six feet, but that is just a measure of sensible nearness in this time of pandemic.

What does "solidarity" mean in the context of this pandemic?

2. Because of the power of the tools that technology makes available, we thought we could keep everything under control, "to the point where we deceive ourselves by thinking that we are invulnerable or that we can find a technical solution for everything. Yet, however much effort we make, it has not been possible to control the pandemic that is underway, even in the most economically and technologically developed societies, where it has overwhelmed the capabilities of laboratories and health care facilities." (Note). This weakness, which is difficult for us to admit—and which is much more frequently encountered in parts of the world where there is a lack of water, food, medical care, educational services—unites us all. This is a central point that creates solidarity among us in our weakness.

Despite the risks, some Catholics feel that churches should remain open and public Masses should be celebrated, even against a local Bishop's orders. How would you respond to them?

3. It is true that the Eucharistic celebration is of fundamental importance in building up the Christian community. However, precisely because of the principle of incarnation, which is at the heart of our faith, we must take seriously the concrete concerns to which our body is subject. The Eucharistic celebration involves physical closeness that puts at risk the safety not only of oneself, but also of others. It is therefore necessary to interpret the deeper meaning of the administration of the sacraments, as Jesus himself said, "...the hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth; and indeed the Father seeks such persons to worship Him." (Jn 4:23) Remember however that celebration of the sacraments is the visible sign of our communion with Christ and the Church. And it is a good idea in any event to keep the churches open: this too is a concrete sign that reminds us of the profound meaning of the life of the Christian community.

The document says, “There will be more deaths where already in everyday life people are not guaranteed simple basic health care.” What has this pandemic revealed about our global health care systems? What needs to change?

4. It is true that given the same illnesses, those who have less access to efficient healthcare facilities or simply live in worse sanitary conditions, have more negative outcomes. The pandemic thus reveals the injustice of our healthcare networks, which do not really reflect the equality of all with respect to the right to healthcare. In addition, we have seen the difficulty in organizing a coordinated response to the threat of the pandemic, which requires a comprehensive coordination of healthcare systems. Here too we need to remember that we are connected each to each: “the strength of the process is determined by its weakest link, in terms of speed of diagnosis, rapidity of reaction and proportionate containment measures, adequate structures, systems for record keeping and ability to share information and data.” (Note) We will have to struggle with these issues and determine more clearly who are the authorities responsible for handling emergencies with an overall vision, making decisions and orchestrating communication.

In some situations, medical tools and treatments must be rationed. The document stresses the importance of finding creative solutions and avoiding giving care de facto to the young and denying the elderly. How should doctors and health care workers approach these difficult decisions?

5. It is correct that everything must be done to obtain the necessary medical equipment. If, however, we find ourselves obligated to make dramatic and wrenching decisions, the criteria for assessing the appropriateness of admission to intensive care will have to be developed. It should be remembered, however, that the choice is not about the dignity of the person or the value of his or her life, which is equal and priceless for all, but on the treatment: priority must be given to those who—when needs are equal— are expected to benefit the most. If such a decision is to be made, it must be the result of balancing a multiplicity of considerations, not just age, and must never be applied automatically.

The document stresses the importance of international cooperation and finding solutions that are not limited to what is most beneficial for single nations, but for the global community. How would you assess the degree to which this is happening? This document calls for a shift toward a "global bioethical perspective" that takes into account the intersections between economics, public health (particularly preventative care), education and care for the environment: What would a world that has this kind of bioethical perspective look like?

6. For years discussions have focused on the need for greater investment in community and public healthcare through prevention, healthy lifestyles and pollution reduction. If you take better care of the environment and the community, you take better care of people. And vice versa: personal lifestyles, prevention, early and better care for people produces a healthy community. All of this involves political responsibilities, the organization of healthcare,

public education, and fostering civic responsibility. This approach must be managed with a system mentality, which is often lacking at various levels. And it also involves a reflection about the goals of medicine. Too often medicine focuses much more on diagnosis and therapy, which are “specialized and sectoral,” rather than on a globally integrated vision. Avoid evaluating cost-effectiveness/efficiency in terms of performance and short-term results. Political decisions have favored whatever produces the greatest return in terms of “image,” in advanced technological investment, in immediate results, neglecting greater investment in basic medicine and in epidemiology and public health. More doctors and better organization are needed.

What message would you give to doctors and health care workers on the front lines? And to scientists looking for treatments and vaccines?

7. Based on my experience, especially in Italy, but also elsewhere in the world, the main message is one of thanks and admiration for the generosity, professionalism and spirit of service of doctors, nurses, other healthcare professionals, technicians and all those who, in various ways, work to deal with the emergency. For everyone, the work of these people represents a fundamental point of reference as well as an example of dedication to the service of the sick, often far beyond professional obligations. With no regard for the limitations imposed by service contracts, where professional competence and activities are principally the subject of a commercial exchange, their self-sacrifice is a manifestation of the most profound and appropriate ethical commitment.