

Workshop Introduction - September 27, 2021

ARCHBISHOP PAGLIA

Eighteen months ago we concluded our Assembly at the Auditorium in Via della Conciliazione: we were more than a thousand people attending the signing of the *Rome Call for AI Ethics*. Covid-19 was starting to raise serious concerns; we were on the eve of the suspension of activities, at that time not foreseeable in its scope. As a matter of fact, ours was the last public initiative that could be held in the Vatican.

Today, after these terrible months, we find ourselves together again, the academicians who were able to come all the way to Rome to attend the event on site, many others connected via online modalities that we have all learned to use. I see this substantial number of participants in our workshop as a sign of the desire to resume our journey with determination and to meet in person again with all the richness that this entails. I therefore thank you for your strong presence.

We start again not as if nothing had happened, but rather with a clear awareness of both the losses we have suffered and the expressions of solidarity and generosity that we have witnessed during this period. We want to re-read this time together precisely so that it will not have passed in vain. We want to listen attentively to what has happened, dwelling on the lessons that we can draw from it and that call for our responsibility. Our Workshop on "Public Health in Global Perspective" is not a reflection on the pandemic, because our intent is not to look back, but to look towards the future, and to identify the changes we need to make.

The work of the Academy: published documents

The Academy immediately sought to understand what the pandemic was manifesting and the changes it was causing within society and in the hearts of each individual. For this reason, from the very beginning it engaged in a series of considerations to which many of you contributed in a prompt and competent manner. I thank you for this as well! We have thus published a number of documents on different themes, tied by a shared feature: the (sapiential) questioning about the meaning of the events we were

going through. Our belief is that if this questioning is not brought to the forefront, any answer will be superficial: pragmatic rearrangements will be attempted to improve efficiency and organization, but the deeper issues that need to be addressed will not be touched.

In the first two documents - *Pandemic and Universal Brotherhood* (March 30, 2020) and *Humana Communitas in the Era of the Pandemic* (July 22, 2020) - this approach was particularly emphasized. We examined how vulnerability, loss and limitations cannot be an obstacle to the search for meaning in our existence and social coexistence, but they are constitutive elements of it. In the same way we worked to nurture a hope that is not defeated by illness and death. Then, our attention was directed to those sections of society that are marked by greater fragility and to the solidarity they need: *Old Age: Our Future* (February 9, 2021), *Covid-19: Learning from Persons with Disabilities* (June 15, 2021), and, finally, the latest text on children, which will be published in the coming days. The Academy also actively collaborated with the Vatican Covid-19 Commission, created by Pope Francis in March 2020. Several documents among those we just mentioned were signed together with it. In particular, the collaboration was strengthened to draft and spread the Note on the topic of vaccines, whose equal and universal distribution is one of our main commitments (*Vaccine for All. 20 points for a fairer and healthier world*, December 29, 2020).

Our Workshop and its backdrop

Turning now to the Workshop we are launching, I would like to emphasize how its backdrop is Pope Francis' central message in his Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*: we are part of one human family and no one will be able to save themselves on their own. It is necessary to identify the dynamics in our relationships that lead to maintaining “areas of well-being” of the few, at the expense of the many. Today, individualism must give way to an increasingly broad and inclusive "We" that translates an effective "social friendship" into practice. That is a need that comes from a vision of relationships and world balances based on what we are experiencing in these months and that the Gospel helps us to better understand and practice with greater intensity.

We had never perceived so well how much the health of every single individual is connected to the health of all individuals as in the last period, and the importance of considering each individual on an equal footing with the others. It is therefore unacceptable that some people are privileged at the expense of others. Differences, disparities and inequalities deny this fundamental evidence and must therefore be overcome.

The topic of global bioethics, on which Pope Francis had strongly urged us to reflect in the letter *Humana communitas*, that he sent us for the 25th anniversary of the Academy's founding, has come to the fore with unexpected strength because of the pandemic. Certainly global bioethics does not coincide with public health. But they do have numerous lines of convergence. Starting from Pope Francis' stimulus, the aspect that I would like above all to highlight is how already in the moment of knowledge of the phenomena, in our way of framing them and putting them in relation to each other, a responsibility is played out that should not be reserved for the operative moment alone.

Responsibility to act, but also to know

We could say that this is a widening of horizons which leads us to decline in our own sphere - that is the protection and promotion of life and health - the principle of the superiority of the whole with respect to the parts (cf. EG nn. 234-237). This principle also implies a more careful consideration of the novelty of the meanings emerging from the mutual connections of the whole with the parts, as well as of the parts among themselves. During the pandemic we became aware in an almost traumatic way of the interdependence between the life of each individual and the life of all individuals, an interdependence which also applies to the relation between personal health and public health. Talking about phenomena in terms of public health means placing oneself at the crossroads between the search for causes and clinical definitions, on the one hand, and, on the other, the economic and political dynamics that have influenced their occurrence, dissemination and management. We are at the convergence of two practices that take place in the social body: one that concerns our

conceptual and scientific representations of phenomena, and the other that results from operational choices, power relations, balances of power and value systems.

It is our responsibility, therefore, to elaborate the phenomena in such a way as to make them more visible, giving them proper importance, so that the cognitive basis that guides our action is more adequate. During the days of the Workshop we will be able to explore the different aspects of these issues from this perspective; we will be able to question ourselves on the solicitations we get from them in order to convert our perception of reality and our criteria for action, both as people and as society.

Thinking about the future, about the health of the inhabitants of this planet, all of them, no one excluded, is an immense challenge, it requires a wide wisdom, a bold invocation, a sincere and deep listening. For this reason, we have decided to start our workshop with two female voices. First of all, we will attend the screening of *En Confinamant*, a video about the universe made by Catalan artist Eugenia Balcells during the lockdown; immediately afterwards, we will listen to a biblical reflection by our French academician Anne Marie Pellettier. Thank you for these "great" outlooks and words which mark the beginning of our work these days. And thanks to all of you, speakers, academicians and listeners, for your presence here, a sure sign of the hope we so desperately need.

(Official Text: Italian; translation by Leonardo Stefanucci, revised by Fabrizio Mastrofini)