



Messengers of Hope

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Darkness covered the earth in 2020 when COVID 19 spread across the globe causing havoc to the lives of people, organizations and countries. As of March 4, 2021, there have been over 115 million confirmed cases and over 2.5 million deaths from the virus with 192 countries directly affected by the pandemic. Grief became rampant as families lost loved ones, small and large organizations went out of business, and countries have had to close their borders to contain and limit the spread from outside visitors. Social distancing and wearing masks have become the norm. The ability to make human contact, such as the hug or the handshake, were discouraged. Social life as it once was has disappeared. Students from grade schools, middle schools, and high schools have had to be home-schooled oftentimes by parents who were balancing work with home life to make ends meet. The working poor, the unemployed, and the homeless were more apparent. Celebrations such as graduations, weddings, retirement parties, and holidays were limited in size and scope. Even funerals could not be attended by all family members who desired to bid their last farewell. Stress led to frustration, frustration led to anger, anger turned into hatred as evidenced by the multiple civil unrests. It is a time in our history when it feels like hope is lost and the words of the psalmist ring out "Save me, O Lord, in your kindness." (Psalm 31).

During the time of St. Francis, leprosy was a prevalent disease that had the potential of annihilating a town. It was such a feared disease that the mayor of Assisi would require a house search to check for signs of leprosy. If anyone would be found to have any markings, they would be sent to the leper colony. The individual would be escorted to the edge of town where a funeral service would be performed. Dust was poured on their heads to signify a burial. They would be given a cloak made of woolen cloth, gloves to cover their hands and a clapper to announce they were near. They would be required to stand off-wind if they encountered any townsfolk. They were provided with a single drinking flask with orders that they were not allowed to dip their flask in the same river that was used by the town for drinking water. They were outcasts, they were neglected and, because of their condition, they were feared, especially by Francis. Yet Francis was moved by the plight of the lepers and when he touched a leper's hand, it left a profound change in Francis' perspective. He no longer operated from a "poor struggling me" mentality. He felt a deep compassion, not pity or fear, for this "other" person. He saw through the person's disease and realized that the leper was one of God's creations who was in need.

Francis' spirituality invited his followers to look beyond their roles—they should see themselves as a vehicle of a deeper call for helping one another—especially those who are hurting. There are many events in history when a disease provided similar challenges for humankind, such as the small pox epidemic in 1900, in which many religious orders, such as the Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia, cared for those in need. During those troubled times, the Franciscan spirituality continues on, as it does today.

Pope Francis' Social Encyclical "Fratelli tutti," which borrows the title of the "Admonitions" of St. Francis of Assisi, discusses many new paths of hope despite the dark clouds of the COVID pandemic.

54. For God continues to sow abundant seeds of goodness in our human family. The recent pandemic enabled us to recognize and appreciate once more all those around us who, in the midst of fear, responded by putting their lives on the line. We began to realize that our lives are interwoven with and sustained by ordinary people valiantly shaping the decisive events of our shared history. (He listed many healthcare roles as examples).

As a Chief Mission Officer for Virginia Mason Franciscan Health, I witnessed the seeds of goodness by our healthcare team. Bed capacity, supplies and staffing shortages were challenges. Staff have diligently

worked long hours and are exhausted from addressing ongoing needs that arise. During the pandemic, healthcare leaders have had to make difficult decisions resulting from the influx of COVID positive patients in the hospitals. Given the life-threatening and contagious nature of the disease, one of the decisions was to implement a no visitor policy. This had caused much stress to our patient and their family because of the separation. Amid this difficult situation, our various clinical teams demonstrated exceptional compassionate care to make patients know they are not alone. In many instances, our teams found varied ways to keep families informed, such as providing I-pads so that patients can virtually connect with their family. When a patient is nearing end of life, our teams provided family members with appropriate PPE so that they may be at the bedside during their loved one's final moments. Chaplains were also in attendance to provide additional support.

Francis' spirituality invites his followers to listen to the cries of the vulnerable and to care for the marginalized.

While COVID vaccines are being made available to immunize the population from the COVID virus, our healthcare team recognized the plight of the poor and marginalized in our communities, especially the elderly who do not have access nor support to register to receive the vaccines. We contacted the churches as well as community providers who serve the poor to locate and identify members of their respective communities who needed extra help. We set up appointment times at our vaccine clinics specifically for these community groups. One of our outreach coordinators described one of her rewarding experiences:

Yesterday I called an elderly African American to schedule him for his first vaccine dosage. His name was on a list provided by one of our partnering African American Churches. I believe he is in his 80s. Anyway, he was so excited that I was calling. He explained to me that his wife had passed away from Covid and she was the one who knew how to "do that internet stuff." Since her death, he had cancelled the service because he didn't know how to use it. He said normally she would make appointments for them. "She was the one to make all these kinds of arrangements for us." He said he had been feeling lonely with no family around and that no one cared. He knew he was eligible for the vaccine because he watched TV. But he didn't know how to sign up to be vaccinated. He was afraid to go out because he didn't want to contract Covid like his wife did. He started to cry and was just so thankful. After I signed him up, he asked if St. Anne's, the vaccination location, was wheelchair accessible. He said he has a wheelchair now that his wife is gone. When she was alive, he got around much better. His wheelchair he explained, was not electric and hard for him to operate. After answering his question, I called one of our partnering agencies to see what they could do to help him get a better wheelchair. They called him immediately and will be getting him an electric wheelchair!

I am so happy for him. In the midst of all this turmoil these days, we can still bring a smile, some hope, and even a wheelchair to make someone's life just a little bit better.

In *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis encourages us to be messengers of hope.

55. I invite everyone to renewed hope, for hope "speaks to us of something deeply rooted in every human heart, independently of our circumstances and historical conditioning. Hope speaks to us of a thirst, an aspiration, a longing for a life of fulfillment, a desire to achieve great things, things that fill our heart and lift our spirit to lofty realities like truth, goodness and beauty, justice and love.... Hope is bold; it can look beyond personal convenience, the petty securities and compensations which limit our horizon, and it can open us up to grand ideals that make life more beautiful and worthwhile.

In keeping with the popular prayer of St. Francis, let us pray: "Make me a channel of Your peace. Where there is darkness, let me bring Your light and Where there is despair, let me bring hope."