

A homily of the English-speaking Mission, Archdiocese of Berlin on March 22, 2020

These turbulent times!

My dear parishioners, beloved people of God,
Greetings and may the peace of Christ be with you!

This is the fourth Sunday of Lent. It is traditionally known as Laetare Sunday. This name is taken from the Introit "*Laetare Jerusalem*", which means "Rejoice, oh Jerusalem". This Sunday marks the halfway point in the Lenten season of fastening, abstinence and penance and because of this it is a day of joy in anticipation of the close arrival of Easter.

The liturgy invites us to experience a deep joy, a great exultation. But this is entirely contradictory to the sentiment currently prevailing in these difficult and unprecedented times caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

There is a lot of panic. The coronavirus has dealt a heavy blow to the entire globe and to our normal daily lives as we used to know them. A lot of people are panicking and freaking out. The whole system is affected. Anxiety is running high in various departments and spheres of life: the economy, politics, society, culture and our faith. Even the normal and natural things we do like sneezing and coughing which we otherwise take for granted have become public health risks. If this happens now in public places, people will immediately vacate that place. What a whirlwind of a time. Everybody is trying to adjust to the situation.

For Christians in general, this time is a painful experience. Churches are closed and the fellowship of believers that sustains the Christian life has been cancelled. For Catholics, the denial of access to the celebration of the Eucharist, the "source and summit of our Christian life", is a major challenge. I cannot

articulate in words, my dear parishioners, the feeling I have, celebrating this Mass in front of empty pews and without seeing your faces. Is this some kind of a dream? No, it is a real story! This is real and we are all part of this story.

The saying rings true that when crisis strikes we reveal what is most important to us, both as individuals and as a society. The discussion about measures for coping is almost obsessive. We are being flooded with information and misinformation about the whole situation. Many are trying to develop opinions about what may or may not work. That's creativity, right? But there are many indications that people are confused.

It is clear how humanity can be confused in the face of crisis. But as we try to come to terms with all this and to understand what is going on, we need to move quickly beyond reacting to coronavirus to wondering about

the wisdom of the measures taken against it and pondering on how we can make this time a profitable one. The pandemic compels the Church as an institution and all of us Christians to consider our roles during a time of crisis. Sure, the buzz words today are “wash your hands”, “keep safe”, “stay at home”, “stock up with enough food”, “work from home”, and gatherings and events are being cancelled etc., but we can also inject faith, hope and love into all this confusion.

How?

1. Faith

We need to demonstrate our Christian faith that we are not alone in this, that God is still with the world. We need to demonstrate our faith against all prophets of doom who see what is going on as all evil without stopping to ask what we can learn from all this. Part of the Christian message is that God comes to us in ways that defy our expectations. The incarnation story explains it all. We need to understand how God is close to us at this time in simple ways beyond the institutionalized forms we have been used to. The situation compels us to sit at home, but faith can also be practiced at home. This is a time to strengthen the domestic church. The term “Domestic Church” refers to the family, the smallest body of gathered believers in Christ. The Greek word *ecclesiola* refers to the little church. Jesus promised to be where two or three are gathered in His name (Mt 18:20). The Early Church Fathers understood the family as a fertile ground for discipleship, sanctification and holiness. The family is our first community and the most basic way in which the Lord gathers us, forms us, and acts in our world.

This aspect of the Church has been much neglected. We now therefore have an opportunity to revive the domestic Church. If the domestic Church is revived, renewed and strengthened, the impact will reflect on the parish, parochial and universal body of the Church. When we congregate again, we shall return with our families, both young and old. So let's get to work! Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them (Psalms 126:6). Let us go forth in peace to love and serve the Lord in our families. It is a time for family evangelization.

Another aspect I briefly wish to mention here is that the present time could help us to redefine our system of values in the light of faith. This is very important because without the light of faith we would all be blind. The light of faith helps us to face reality in its proper dimension. It has struck me that this pandemic is given a name which stems from crown, *corona*. Without trying to explain why it was given this name, I find in the name *corona* a metaphor to evaluate our value system. It is at times like this that we are called on with the light of faith to ask ourselves and our generation the basic question about the essence of our lives. Where does my crown lie? What has been my greatest aspiration in life? What has been the most essential thing in my life? What is my crown, what

makes me a hero, celebrity or the most powerful person: money, alcohol, sport, social status, partying, academic qualifications, material possessions, etc.? We have seen all these things crash before our eyes. While these things are not essentially bad in themselves, they have the tendency of disconnecting us from the proper dimensions of reality. Their pursuit has brought suffering to the family. This is a time to rediscover the value of the family and to rediscover our humanity. It is a precious time to evaluate our value system both as individuals and as a society and to return to the essentials. Virtue lies in the middle.

2. Hope:

The statistics concerning the number of fatalities are high and look scary. The number of deaths, especially in the areas most affected, strikes terror into the heart of humanity. In fact, this pandemic has revealed more than ever how interconnected we are. How globally connected we are. It has underlined the fact that regardless of our beliefs, one experience common to all of us is that we are vulnerable. Humanity as a whole is vulnerable to death. This is one of the areas in which we share a kinship. The Christian message tells the story of the defeat of death through the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus our Lord. The Lenten period prepares us for the Easter. In Easter we celebrate our victory over death. We can stand bold and brave like St Paul and ask "O death where is your victory, o death where is your sting" (1 Cor. 15:55-57).

In his Encyclical *SPE SALVO facti sumus* ("In hope we are saved" (Rom. 8:24)), Pope Benedict XVI explains that "redemption is offered to us in the sense that we have been given hope, trustworthy hope, by virtue of which we can face our present: the present, even if it is arduous..." (25). The coronavirus pandemic is one of most difficult and arduous moments in the history of the 21st century. But no matter how dark and gloomy it looks, with hope we will overcome it. With hope the rose flower will blossom again out of our brokenness.

3. Love:

Medical staff and scientists are doing a remarkable job, struggling beyond their wits and strength to save people's lives, and to search for a vaccine that will cure the disease. However, it is also good to remind ourselves that redemption cannot come from science alone: humanity is redeemed by love. When someone has the experience of great love in his or her life, this is a moment of "redemption" which gives a new meaning to life. We need to discover this new meaning of life. This is our calling and our vocation as Christians.

Our world needs unconditional love. God loves us unconditionally. This unconditional love of God gives the assurance that "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38-39). If this absolute love exists, with its absolute

certainty, then – and only then – is humanity “redeemed”, no matter what might happen in specific circumstances.

At this moment there is a tendency to be selfish. To think about oneself alone. Let us conquer this tendency and think a little for the good of others. Let us share love at this time in practical terms. A little act of kindness will mean a lot. A friendly call to stem loneliness can help. Think of how to show love at this difficult time. Protect yourself and protect others too. As we maintain social distance, we can also stand together united in heart, mind and Spirit. Peace be with you.

Father Sylvester Ajunwa

Berlin, 22 March 2020