



The CORONAVIRUS: *God's Plan and Our Response*

BY REV. JOSEPH M. ESPER

Is the recently-arrived coronavirus a punishment for humanity's sins? Could it be God is using this growing and ever-more frightening epidemic as a means of getting our attention? Is it a coincidence that this disease seems to have originated in a country currently engaged in a fierce persecution of the Church?

These and other questions are taking on increased urgency as the epidemic spreads and claims ever more victims. It now seems as if the entire world is affected by it to one degree or another, and the threat posed by the coronavirus—also known as COVID-19, or as the Wuhan virus (the province in China where it apparently began)—has become *the* most important and compelling news story of 2020.

The coronavirus (named for the crown-like spikes found on its surface) has appeared in almost every continent and nation, and is severely affecting global finances, trade, and consumer confidence. China's economy has virtually ground to a halt—and because of the inter-connectedness of the world financial system, many other nations are suffering as well. Hundreds of billions of dollars in sales and investments have been lost, factories and

production lines are stilled, financial markets are struggling, medical supplies and drug components (many of which come from China) are increasingly difficult to obtain, and uncertainty over the availability of food and other basic necessities has become an ever-present worry for millions of people.

At the same time, throughout much of the world international travel has been severely restricted, persons coming from foreign nations have been placed in quarantine, schools have been closed, and public gatherings—including religious services—are being discouraged or forbidden. The disease is not yet anywhere nearly as deadly as other historical epidemics, such as the Black Death of the 14th century, which wiped out one-third of Europe's population, or the Spanish flu of 1918 which ravaged the globe just over a century ago and killed well over forty million people (including two of the three Fatima visionaries). Nevertheless, some experts believe COVID-19 may soon become a pandemic, or a global epidemic, causing an untold number of infections and deaths, along with severe and previously-unthinkable disruptions to everyday life.

Lessons from Scripture

Is it possible this dreadful affliction is actually a form of divine punishment? There are certainly instances from the Old Testament in which pestilence, or a contagious and deadly disease, served this purpose. A terrible pestilence was one of the ten plagues inflicted on Egypt. As the Lord warned Pharaoh through His servant Moses, "If you refuse to let [My people] go and continue holding them . . . the Lord will afflict all your livestock in the field—your horses, asses, camels, herds and flocks—with a very severe pestilence" (Ex. 9:3). Years later the Israelites themselves were in danger of experiencing this form of divine retribution; complaining about their sinfulness to Moses, God threatened, "I will strike them with pestilence and wipe them out" (Nm. 14:12).

On yet another occasion Moses further warned the people, "If you do not hearken to the voice of the Lord, your God, and are not careful to observe all His commandments . . . the Lord will bring a pestilence upon you that will persist until He has exterminated you from the land you are entering to occupy" (Dt. 28:15, 21). Such a tragic event in fact occurred centuries later during the reign of

King David. When he offended the Lord by conducting a census (wanting to know the number of men in his kingdom fit for military service), the Lord in response required him to choose from one of three different possible punishments. A repentant David chose a pestilence, which in just three days caused the deaths of seventy thousand men (1 Chr. 21:14). On yet another occasion the Lord, speaking through the prophet Jeremiah, said to the Israelites, “You did not obey Me by proclaiming your [enslaved or oppressed] neighbors and kinsmen free. I now proclaim you free, says the Lord, for the sword, famine, and pestilence. I will make you an object of horror to all the kingdoms of the earth” (Jer. 34:17).

The Old Testament often presents Divine Justice as severe and uncompromising—but in a famous and frequently-quoted passage, God reveals His mercy toward His people. Speaking to Solomon after the king had prayed on behalf of his subjects, the Lord said:

I have heard your prayer, and I have chosen this place for My house of sacrifice. If I close Heaven so that there is no rain, if I command the locust to devour the land, if I send pestilence among My people, and if My people, upon whom My Name has been pronounced, humble themselves and pray, and seek My presence and turn from their evil ways, I will hear them from Heaven and pardon their sins and revive their land (2 Chr. 7:12-14).

A similar promise on the Lord’s part to forgive and protect His people is found in one of the most reassuring of the psalms: “*For He will rescue you from the snare of the fowler, from the destroying pestilence. . . . You shall not fear the terror of the night nor the arrow that flies by day: not the pestilence that roams in darkness nor the devastating plague at noon*” (Ps. 91:3,5-6).

This theme of God’s loving care for His children is especially emphasized in the New Testament; for instance,

Jesus spoke of the importance of avoiding worry and instead trusting in divine providence: “Your heavenly Father knows that you need [food, clothing, shelter, and other necessities]. But seek first the Kingdom of God, and His righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides” (Mt. 6:32-33).

Furthermore, in contrast to a commonly-held assumption of His day, Our Lord rejected the idea that all misfortune is a punishment for sin—as in the case of the man born blind, whose affliction was not anyone’s fault (Jn. 9:3). However, that does not mean Jesus denied a link between personal sin and suffering in every instance. In stating that the Galileans murdered by Pontius Pilate were no guiltier than any of their countrymen, or that the eighteen people killed by a falling tower were no more worthy of dying than anyone else in Jerusalem, Jesus solemnly stated, “I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did!” (Lk. 13:5). On another occasion, Jesus warned a man whom He had healed, “Look, you are well; do not sin anymore, so that *nothing worse may happen to you*” (Jn. 5:14, emphasis added)—with the clear implication being that sinful behavior can lead to unfortunate personal results.

When God “punishes” individual sinners, it’s as a form of loving discipline (Heb. 12:5-11). As the Lord announced through the prophet Ezekiel, “As I live, says the Lord God, I swear I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked man, but rather in the wicked man’s conversion, that he may live” (Ezek. 33:11). With entire countries and societies, however, a very different dynamic is at work.

St. Augustine, in his great theological reflection *The City of God*, noted that because kingdoms and nations will not exist in eternity, they must be rewarded for their righteousness, or punished for their sins, in this world. There are many historical examples of this; for instance,



nations have thrived or suffered depending on their treatment of the Jewish people (cf. Is. 41:11), and throughout much of its history, America—because of its generosity and overall respect for religious freedom—has merited God’s special blessing and protection.

Developing this idea, Catholic historian Roberto de Mattei notes,

Once men were able to read God’s messages in all events occurring beyond their will. . . . [Now, however,] those who live in practical atheism . . . are unable to understand the action of Providence, which gives a reason for everything that happens, even tragedies, such as epidemics or earthquakes. The Catholic faith teaches that if individual men die unrepentant, they are punished for eternity; but cities and peoples, which have no eternal destiny, are punished in temporal time for their sins.

These words echo the observation over a century ago of Pope Benedict XV, who, during World War I, stated that “private misfortunes are deserved punishment, or at least an exercise of virtue for individuals, while public scourges are atonement for the sins committed by public authorities and nations that have turned away from God.”

Thus, it can reasonably be argued that this current crisis is caused, at least in part, by the sinfulness of today’s world. (China, of course—though especially guilty of persecuting God’s people—is far from the only nation on earth in a state of rebellion against the Lord. America in particular—because of the numerous divine favors and special blessings it received throughout its history, and its terrible sins of abortion and widespread sexual immorality today—has much to answer for.)

Pope St. Gregory the Great & The Plague

In 590 Rome was struck by a deadly plague, with Pope Pelagius II being one of its first victims. **St. Gregory the Great** was elected to succeed him, and the new pope, after immediately declaring the plague to be an expression of divine displeasure, ordered the clergy and residents of the city to join him in doing penance for their sins. Gregory arranged a “seven-form litany”: a procession of the entire population of Rome, divided into seven groups based on age and sex; the participants walked slowly through the city, barefoot and with ashes on their heads. *The procession moved from church to church, singing litanies and the Kyrie eleison (“Lord,*

have mercy”). Even as an additional eighty people dropped dead from the plague, Gregory insisted the procession and prayers continue. A famous icon of Our Lady, traditionally believed to have been painted by St. Luke, was brought to the front of the line, and according to legend, as the Holy Image advanced, the air became cleaner and healthier. Many persons claimed to hear angels singing Regina Coeli (“Queen of Heaven”—the origin of that hymn in honor of Our Lady). It’s also said Pope Gregory saw an angel on top of Hadrian’s Castle along the Tiber River, placing his sword back in its sheath—a sign that the plague was over.

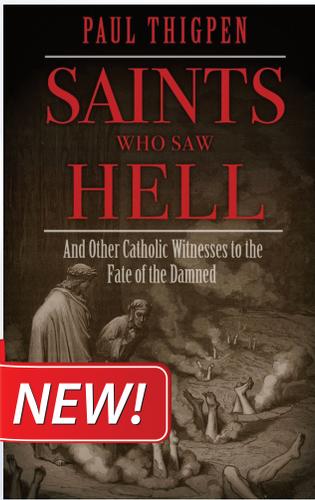
St. Charles Borromeo & The Plague

Almost 1000 years later the northern Italian city of Milan was also struck by a plague. Like Pope St. Gregory the Great before him, Milan’s archbishop, **St. Charles Borromeo**, interpreted this affliction as a punishment for the community’s sins—so, *in 1576, he organized penitential processions by the city’s residents (those who hadn’t fled) on three consecutive days, with himself barefoot and in the lead. On the third day, the archbishop carried the city’s prize icon—one of the nails by which Our Lord had been fastened to the Cross—and gave a sermon titled “Jerusalem Has Grievously Sinned.” Immediately afterwards, he—like St. Gregory—saw a vision of an angel sheathing its sword, and announced to the people that their prayers had been successful: the plague was over.*

Oberammergau, Germany & The Plague

Yet another example can be cited of a successful act of communal penance in the face of disaster. The town of **Oberammergau** lies in southern Bavaria, near the border with modern-day Austria. In 1634 a man arrived there for the celebration of Christmas, but he unknowingly brought with him the bubonic plague. He soon died, but not before infecting many others.



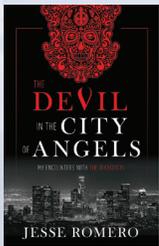


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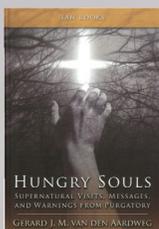


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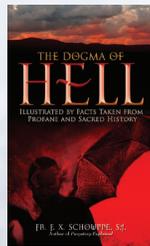


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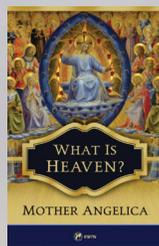


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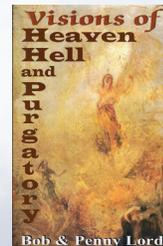
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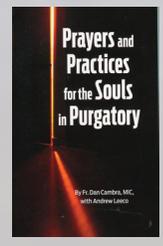


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As the number of plague-related deaths reached crisis proportions, the town's religious and civic leaders turned to God and made a solemn vow: if delivered from the plague, they would perform a Passion play every ten years in perpetuity. As soon as that promise was made, the plague ended; no further villagers died, and those who had been infected all recovered. The first play was performed that very year, and from then on in every year ending in zero—except for 1920, which was delayed until 1922, and 1940, which was cancelled because of World War II. (Some 2000 villagers participate in the once-a-decade event, and over 500,000 people attend one of the famous Oberammergau Passion Play performances over the course of the summer.)

The Catholic Church has historically been at the forefront of organized efforts to respond to plagues, pestilences, and other outbreaks of disease. Not only was this a matter of Christian compassion; many times priests and religious had the best understanding of medicine and hygiene (limited as it was). Moreover, civic officials often fled to a place of safety when the plague arrived, leaving Church leaders to tend to the needs of the people (as was the case with St. Charles Borromeo in Milan). Over the centuries numerous saints personally cared for the needs of afflicted and dying persons. Quite often God preserved them from

becoming ill themselves, but not always—in 1591, for instance, the Jesuit novice St. Aloysius Gonzaga, after tending the victims of a plague in Rome, contracted the illness himself and died at the age of twenty-three. Furthermore, the infamous Black Death of the 14th century severely harmed the Church; many faithful priests and religious themselves died from the fearsome epidemic after selflessly caring for the victims—unlike the corrupt and selfish clergy who survived because they had fled for safety. (This tragedy weakened the Church's spiritual fervor and contributed to some of the abuses which caused so much turmoil and confusion in the 16th century).

Our modern world is far better-equipped to understand and treat widespread and serious medical problems than any other era of history, and efforts to create vaccines and prevent the spread of diseases like the coronavirus are certainly urgent and legitimate—but that doesn't mean the spiritual aspects of such outbreaks can be ignored. *Even as individual Christians are called to pray for and perhaps assist victims of the disease, the Church has the mission of facilitating public acts of prayer and penance on the part of its members, while also trying to discern the signs of the times. Is it now the case—as it so often seemed to be in history—that our*

sins have helped cause or bring about a widespread medical emergency? If so, what spiritual steps must be taken to address this situation?

Warnings from Heaven

The theme of divine retribution for human sinfulness is not limited to examples from Sacred Scripture and Church history; many alleged contemporary private revelations also make this connection. *Sister Agnes Sasagawa*, who in 1973 received frightening warnings of future chastisements from Our Lady of Akita (messages later judged authentic by the local bishop), stated this past October that the Mother of God had spoken to her again, telling us that we must *“put on ashes and pray a repentant Rosary every day.”* One author links this warning to the recent outbreak of the coronavirus in China:

This virus seems different than previous scares, and originated in early December—right about the time forty days would have passed from Sister Sasagawa's call to put on ashes. . . . China makes sense as the epicenter, given the state of persecution of Catholics (and all Christians) since the Vatican concordat (immediately and ruthlessly exploited by the [Chinese Communist] Party). Large images of Chairman Xi and Mao [the founder of the Chinese Communist dictatorship] have been forcibly placed in churches, while icons, statues, and crosses have been torn down in many cases.

Is China indeed being punished for its persecution of Christians? No one can reasonably deny that this is at least a possibility. (To the objection that in this instance many innocent people are also suffering along with the guilty, it must be noted that this has often sadly been the case throughout salvation history; moreover, one of the effects of original sin is that perfect justice is rarely experienced or achieved in this life.)

It's claimed that a recently-discovered and translated old Chinese prophecy speaks with remarkable accuracy about the current plague:

The year 2020—the year all of China will weep. The omens will be so bad that the New Year will not be celebrated. Then the plague will come. It will come with a fury—the tigers and the wolves will hide in the mountains. The plague will encompass all the land—and will eventually spread to the whole world. Very soon, rice will become so expensive that no one can eat. Then the rivers will sink all the boats. People in that year will only be able to harvest rice in the very early spring. There will be no harvest of late season rice, beans, wheat, and oats because vast clouds of locusts will lay waste to the entire countryside.

[I] assure you Chinese in 2020 that the locusts will fall from the skies and the destruction will be complete. Smoke and fire will fill the fields—but nothing will be able to stop the swarms. Once the locusts have destroyed the land and the smoke is still coming from the ground, the rivers will flood the countryside. [I] will tell you Chinese in 2020 how to survive. Remain very close to your families and your neighbors. The best is to have stored up plenty of gold and food to live and share freely with those you love. Tolerate no thieves among the people. Be uniters and not dividers. If you can do all these things, you will survive.

We are, of course, in no position to pass judgment on the authenticity of this supposed prophecy from an anonymous source, but—in the realm of Catholic private revelations—there are many more contemporary messages deserving of consideration. For instance, the late visionary Louise Tomkiel was supposedly told early in the 21st century by God the Father that “Communism is not dead! It lies quietly underground, gaining power, *producing toxins, chemicals and a multitude of germs for disease control*” (message of June 18, 2004—emphasis added).

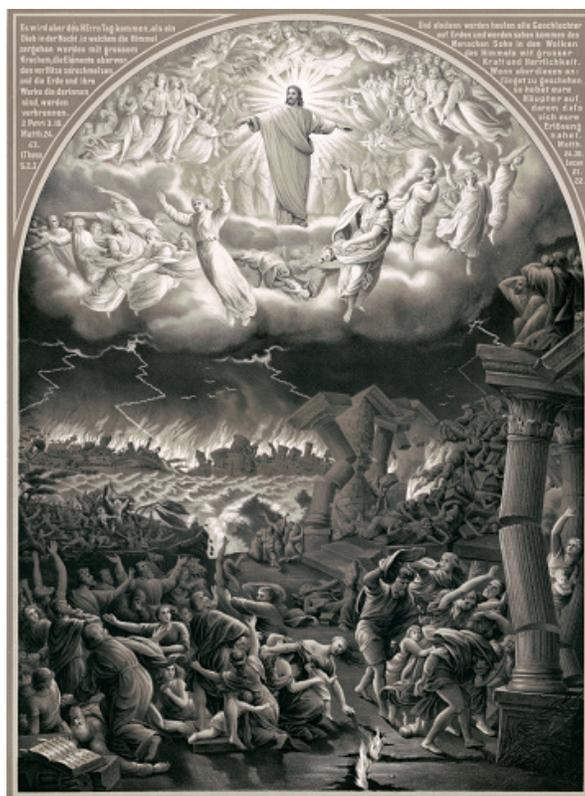
The messenger known as Brother Enoch was alleged warned by Our Lady,

Little children, epidemics, viruses, and plagues are spreading throughout the creation; many of these diseases and viruses are being created in laboratories and sponsored

by the Illuminati Elites at the service of the New World Order. These foundations at the service of my adversary have been given millions of dollars for the creation of all kinds of diseases and viruses in laboratories, which are spreading in the airspace of many nations; these lethal viruses have as a purpose to decimate much of the world's population, especially the population of the so-called third-world countries. My children, very soon viruses, diseases, and plagues, created in laboratories and scattered in the air, will be activated by the climate change that your planet is suffering from. Heat will activate the viruses that are being spread in the air. The children and the elderly population will be the most affected (message of Feb. 13, 2020).

Despite the terrifying nature of these threats, great numbers of people stubbornly cling to their immoral lifestyles; as Enoch was supposed told by Jesus, “Natural disasters, drought, viruses and diseases, are about to unleash and this humanity remains numbed by sin” (message of Jan. 23, 2020).

A visionary known as Victor was told by Our Lady that it will become mandatory for everyone to receive a new vaccine against the coronavirus. This vaccine may have unpleasant side-effects, but, Mary assured the children of God will be spared from experiencing them (message of Feb. 26, 2020). Even so, the righteous may, like everyone else, have their lives disrupted; Jesus allegedly revealed an anonymous visionary that “people may soon be quarantined in their homes to stop the spread of the virus. But without sufficient food, people could starve in their homes” (message of Feb. 24, 2020).



Valentina Papagna, a seer in Australia, was recently shown a multitude of souls dressed in black (representing unrepented sin) and suffering in purgatory; she was told by an angel, “These are the people that recently died unprepared. They died from the coronavirus disease” (vision of Feb. 23, 2020). Several days later, while attending Mass, Our Lord allegedly complained to her, “With all that is happening in the world, with the economy collapsing and with the virus spreading, still *I am rejected by the world. They do not return to Me!* I permit the world to be stripped of the wealth they worship so much. I am patiently waiting so they can open their eyes and acknowledge Me” (message of Feb. 25, 2020—emphasis added).

Even when nations and societies are chastised by God for their sins, the Lord knows and lovingly relates to each individual sinner on a personal basis, desiring his or her eternal salvation. *For this reason, humanity's response to the coronavirus crisis—if it is to be successful—must in some way acknowledge the power and authority of the Creator.*

Advice from Our Lady

The wife, mother, and locutionist known as Elaine was allegedly told by Our Lady, “Be not afraid of the Wuhan virus. Pray today for all those affected by it. Make whatever preparations you can, Elaine, but *do not worry*; worrying makes you more susceptible to illness” (message of Jan. 29, 2020). Thus, in addition to the spiritual necessity of trusting in God, we are given a very practical reason for doing so: worry accomplishes nothing worthwhile, and may even prove detrimental to our health.

Heaven is well aware of the plans of evildoers (who are ultimately serving the Evil One) and of the physical needs of God's children here on earth, and so it's no surprise that—in supposedly speaking to Elaine—Our Lady offered this information and advice:

The coronavirus currently spreading worldwide has been created by man and engineered to be harmful, contagious, and—for many—deadly. It helps decrease the human population upon the earth, seen as a plague by Satan and his minions. Protect yourselves, dear children! Make the same common-sense preparations against this virus as you would against any other virus. And please—do not give in to feelings or worry or even panic. Rather, *pray*, dear children, and leave your worries at the foot of my Son's Cross. You, O faithful remnant, are not to worry or panic— but, rather, you are to *prepare*. Many of my children have

already done some preparations for the chaos and the tumult that is to come. For those of you who have *not*, however, *now* is the time to do so; do not wait! Be prepared to shelter in place. Make certain your household has adequate *food*, especially. Pray, dear children, and your guardian angels will inspire you as to what else to have on hand. There are many sources which list suggested items to procure. However, I know that some of my children are of more limited means than others. Therefore, I tell you, make certain to have adequate amounts of *food* in your homes. Children: take my son Padre Pio's advice: “*Pray, hope, and don't worry.*” As 1 Peter 5:7 says, “*Cast all your anxieties on Jesus, because He cares for you*” (message of Feb. 29, 2020).

Our Lady also allegedly spoke to Elaine of the *importance of spiritual preparations*, should the time come when it's necessary to shelter in place; she advised:

When the days should come that you cannot assemble for Mass, make certain to celebrate some sort of a liturgy in your homes, particularly on Sundays. Read from Scripture. Pray. Keep holy the Lord's day, even if you fall ill. Even if all you can do is pray, pray, dear children, from the heart. Offer any sufferings God may send you for the conversion of sinners, especially within your own families. God will protect and sustain His faithful remnant through the chaos and the tumult that is to come and that, for some, is already here. Entrust yourselves to me, little children. I will watch over you and protect you. I will gather you into safety, here, under my mantle, where you will be protected from the enemy. Miracles will happen among you, my faithful little remnant. Pray, pray, pray! (message of Feb. 27, 2020).

Even if the coronavirus becomes much more deadly and disruptive

than expected—perhaps even leading to economic collapse, societal disintegration, and severe restrictions on personal and religious freedom—Our Lady assures us that Heaven will not abandon those who continue to trust in her Son.

Concluding Thoughts

According to the Spirit Daily website (Feb. 27, 2020), nuns in the Portuguese town of Coimbra once successfully halted a severe pestilence by praying the *Stella Coeli* (“**Star of Heaven**”): “This ancient holy prayer . . . has preserved many place from contagion where it is recited daily with confidence in God and the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It has arrested this scourge in many places.” The words of the prayer are:

The Star of Heaven that nourished the Lord drove away the plague of death which the first parents of man brought into the world. May this bright Star now vouchsafe to extinguish that foul constellation whose battles have slain the people with the wound of death. O most pious Star of the Sea, preserve us from pestilence; hear us, O Lady, for thy Son honors thee by denying thee nothing. Save us, O Jesus, for whom Thy Virgin Mother supplicates Thee.

V: Pray for us, O Holy Mother of God.

R: That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ. Let us pray.

O God of mercy, God of pity, God of benign clemency, Thou Who hast had compassion on the affliction of Thy people, and hast said to the angel striking them, “Stop thy hand”; for the love of this glorious Star, whose breasts Thou didst sweetly drink as antidote for our crimes, grant the assistance of Thy grace, that we may be safely freed from all pestilence, and from unprovided death; and mercifully save us from the gulf of eternal perdition: through Thee, Lord Jesus Christ, King of Glory, Who livest and reignest, world without end. Amen.

Spiritual Combat

In addition to prayers by individuals, families, and prayer groups, parishes or dioceses can arrange for *Holy Hours*, *prayer services (especially focusing on the Rosary and Divine Mercy Chaplet)*, and *special Masses of Reparation*. (In regard to the latter, under the Masses for Various Occasions in the Roman Missal, #48—"In Any Need"—seems particularly appropriate. Furthermore, the Collect, or Opening Prayer, for this Mass contains the words "spare Your people, we pray [who are] rightly chastised now by affliction"—a further recognition by the Church that some misfortunes may indeed be caused by our sins.)

South Korea, which has a substantial Catholic minority, is one of the nations most affected by the coronavirus. Bishop Lazarus You Heung-sik of the Diocese of Daejeon offered some timely thoughts about the disease and a proper response to it:

[This is] a good time to question ourselves about God's plans for humanity shaken by the coronavirus emergency. The Almighty Lord is good and merciful. He alone knows how

much destruction the disease will bring. But it is He Himself Who has permitted it. I pray to understand what the Lord is asking humanity, the Church, the diocese, and me. Everything that happens, even apparently terrible things, are signs of His infinite love. To understand, it is necessary to pray more, to do penance, and to make sacrifices.

This is a fitting response for all Catholics and other Christians throughout the world. Acts of penance and sacrifice—especially fasting—can be very powerful, and our faith teaches us that no sincere prayer is ever unheard or unanswered. Furthermore, the Church firmly declares that the Lord is able to bring good out of every situation. Therefore, as long as we're striving for a true spirit of humble repentance and ongoing trust, and are willing to pray for and help those who suffer from the coronavirus or its effects in whatever way we can, we have nothing to fear; God is with us.

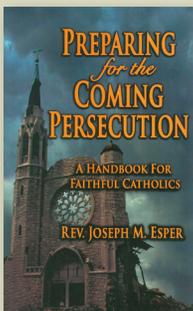
In crucial times such as these, it's important to unite our efforts for the spiritual well-being of our Church, our country,

and the world. One possibility is to join the initiative called Pray and Fast for America (prayandfastforamerica.org); in which you can commit to prayer, fasting, acts of penance, and attendance at Mass or Eucharistic Adoration on behalf of our religious and political leaders, and for other intentions, as well—such as for an end to this epidemic.

As St. Paul assures us, "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature [including manmade plagues or diseases] will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8: 38-39).

REVEREND JOSEPH M. ESPER is a priest of the Archdiocese of Detroit and pastor of Immaculate Conception parish in Anchorville, MI. He received his Master of Divinity degree from St. John's Provincial Seminary in Plymouth, MI. Through the years, Father Joe has lectured at Marian conferences, appeared on EWTN, spoken on Catholic radio, and written more than a dozen articles. He is also the author of numerous books. Many of Father's books are available from Signs and Wonders for Our Times (www.sign.org)

BOOKS by the AUTHOR – REV. JOSEPH M. ESPER

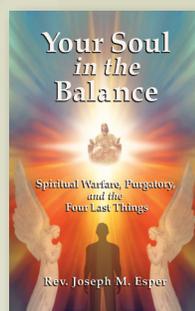


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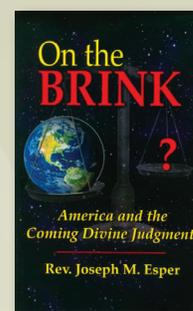


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and compel them to repent and thus avoid everlasting damnation.

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