



The social question under the Covid-19 scenario in Latin America

Diagnosis of the socioeconomic
and environmental situation in
Latin America and the Caribbean

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT CENTER
SOCIO-ANTHROPOLOGICAL PASTORAL OBSERVATORY

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A Catholic University, as any University, is immersed in human society; as an extension of its service to the Church, and always within its proper competence, it is called on to become an ever more effective instrument of cultural progress for individuals as well as for society.

Included among its research activities, therefore, will be a study of serious contemporary problems in areas such as the dignity of human life, the promotion of justice for all, the quality of personal and family life, the protection of nature, the search for peace and political stability, a more just sharing in the world's resources, and a new economic and political order that will better serve the human community at a national and international level.

University research will seek to discover the roots and causes of the serious problems of our time, paying special attention to their ethical and religious dimensions. If need be, a Catholic University must have the courage to speak uncomfortable truths which do not please public opinion, but which are necessary to safeguard the authentic good of society.

(Apostolic Constitution Ex Corde Ecclesiae of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II on Catholic Universities, August 15, 1990).





Presentation

It is not just a question of fighting wretched conditions, though this is an urgent and necessary task. It involves building a human community where men can live truly human lives, free from discrimination on account of race, religion or nationality, free from servitude to other men or to natural forces which they cannot yet control satisfactorily. It involves building a human community where liberty is not an idle word.

Paulo VI, *populorum progressio*, 47, 1967

The social landscape of the Latin American continent shows us that, despite the wealth of goods that Providence has placed in it for the benefit of its people, not everyone enjoys such an abundant treasure, as many of its habitants -especially urban and rural workers- still live in a desperate situation.

I General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate. Rio de Janeiro, 1955

Latin America still seems to live under the tragic sign of underdevelopment, which not only deprives our brothers and sisters of the benefit of material goods, but also of their own human fulfillment. In spite of the efforts being made, there area combined hunger and misery, large-scale diseases and infant mortality, illiteracy and marginalization, great inequalities in income and tensions between social classes, outbreaks of violence and limited people's participation in the management of the common good.

II General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate. Medellin, 1968

The love of God, which radically dignifies us, necessarily becomes communion of love with others and fraternal sharing; for us today it must become in fact a work for justice on behalf of those who are oppressed, a work of liberation for those who need it most. Indeed, "no one can love God, whom he does not see, unless he loves the brother whom he sees" (1 Jn 4:20). In any case, true communion and participation can only exist in this life when projected on the very concrete level of temporal realities, so that the possession, use and transformation of the goods of the earth, of culture, of science and technology will be achieved in a just and fraternal lordship of man over the world, taking into account respect for ecology.

III General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate, 327. Puebla, 1979.

We recognize the dramatic situation in which sin places man. Because man, created just and good in the image of God, as the Lord responsible for creation, by sinning has become at enmity with Him, divided within himself has broken solidarity with his neighbor and destroyed the harmony of nature. There we recognize the origin of the individual and collective evils that we mourn in Latin America: wars, terrorism, drugs, misery, oppression and injustice, institutionalized lies, the marginalization of ethnic groups, corruption, attacks on the family, the neglect of children and the elderly, campaigns against life, abortion, instrumentalization of women, environmental depredation, in short, everything that typifies a culture of death.

IV General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate, 9. Santo Domingo, 1992.

Led by a tendency that prizes profit and stimulates competition, globalization entails a process of concentration of power and wealth in the hands of a few, not only of physical and monetary resources, but especially of information and human resources. The upshot is the exclusion of all those not sufficiently trained and informed, thereby augmenting the inequalities that sadly characterizes our continent and that keep large numbers of people in poverty. ... (62). Structures must be created to firmly establish a social, economic, and political order without inequity, and with opportunities for all. New structures must likewise be created to promote a genuine human coexistence, prevent arrogant domination by some, and facilitate constructive dialogue for the necessary social consensus (384).

V General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops, 62, 384. Aparecida, 2007.

To preach and to encourage the urgent need for profound structural changes in the social and political life of our country is another contribution that the pastoral mission of the church can make. The church sincerely believes that without such changes the structural bases of our whole malaise will remain. The full liberation of the Salvadoran people, not to mention personal conversions, demands a thorough change in the social, political, and economic system. [...] The church does not, therefore, regard it as a crime but rather as a duty to encourage and to guide Christians who have the ability to organize themselves, drawing members from the people and acting for the people. By reason of the same duty the church also denounces the sin of those organizations that turn politics into an absolute, thereby hindering the full development of the human person and showing disrespect for those Christian values that were the inspiration of many of those who belong to various organizations.

San Oscar Romero. 4th Pastoral Letter, 1979.

Latin American societies have faced structural problems for decades: landless peasants, homeless families, workers without rights, people whose dignity has been trampled upon. Today a change of structures is needed, because the social system is no longer sustainable. Francis speaks of the need to globalize hope in contrast to the globalization of exclusion, putting an end to inequality and the throwaway culture. But such a structural transformation begins with a change of mentality: it is necessary it is necessary to abandon the logic of accumulation and move towards a proper stewardship of the common home. It is essential that States and their rulers succeed in guaranteeing a “good living” for all their people, under the principle of the “common good”: “the three Ls” (labor, land, lodge), as well as access to education, health, innovation, artistic and cultural expressions, communication, sports and recreation¹.

¹ *Francisco (2015) Address of The Holy Father to participants in the Second World Meeting Of Popular Movements. Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia.*

Transforming social realities with the power of the Gospel in which Jesus himself identifies with the hungry, thirsty, migrants and homeless (Matthew 25:35). At the beginning of the third millennium of the Christian era, assuming this radical teaching continues to be the horizon of women and men faithful to Jesus Christ. The proclamation of the “Good News” of salvation, love, justice and peace does not always find an easy acceptance in today’s world, nor in our continent, devastated by disease, war, misery and injustice. In this context, we are convinced that systematic social studies will help the Latin American Church to understand the signs of the times and to respond to the problems and demands of our time. In this way “an evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives; it bridges distances...touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others” (EG 24).

The need for a deep recognition of the economic, political and cultural reality, in order to make the political and strategic choices that this transforming journey demands, makes it imperative for our Church to draw closer to the social and

human sciences, keeping in mind that scientific-technical knowledge -including that of the social sciences- has a clear service mission according to our Social Teaching:

New knowledge -technical and scientific- must be placed at the service of man's primary needs, so that the common heritage of humanity can be gradually increased. The full expression of the universal destination of goods principle requires, therefore, action at the international level and planned initiatives on the side of all countries:

«It is necessary to break down the barriers and monopolies which leave so many countries on the margins of development, and to provide all individuals and nations with the basic conditions which will enable them to share in development. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter «Centesimus Annus», 35, AAS 83 (1991) 837.

Pope Francis has told us in this way: “the scientific community is a part of society, and must not be considered separate and independent; indeed, it is called to serve the human family and its integral development”. On that basis, he has expressed his wish that knowledge production would benefit everyone “so that the peoples of the earth will be fed, given to drink, healed and educated; may political life and economy of peoples receive from you indications on how to advance with greater certainty towards the common good, for the benefit especially of the poor and those in need, and towards respect for our planet².

As pilgrims of this mission, and active members of our societies, we are called to serve our people and their integral development through research into the social reality of our region. Such research aims to to recognize and elucidate the sufferings, injustices, strengths and hopes of our people. The

² Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in the Plenary Session of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. Vatican City, 12 November 2018.

fruits of this mission of service are countless, both for our Church and for all our Latin American peoples. Our work is nourished by the dreams of the people of God, and assumes a special commitment with the fundamental values and goods that support relationships between peoples, society and science.

In this way, relying on the valuable work of experts from the humanistic scientific field, committed to give an account of the social debts that cross the continent, and without the pretension of making an exhaustive analysis of the present socioeconomic, political-institutional and socio-cultural processes, we offer through this study a characterization of significant tendencies and situations that affect our societies and compromise the work of the Latin American Church. We recognize that “sometimes we are tempted to be that kind of Christian who keeps the Lord's wounds at arm's length” (EG 270).

In this context, affected in many ways by the Covid-19 pandemic and by global changes, we see signs of God's presence and His plans for our history; signs that lead us to appraise the new path that Celam is trying to follow:

We intend to examine some of the major trends that are emerging in our continent and, at the same time, to recognize the specific shades of each region, each country and each local Church. We try to do this within an analytical perspective and with a critical attitude facing the frequent and accelerated changes that are taking place in the social and ecclesial reality. At the same time, it is important to be aware that this changing epoch is showing a world in which different realities are connected and where progress and failures interact in different dimensions, times and spaces of life [“Revision and Reestructuración del CELAM”, version 13 April 2021].

In this context, we are moved to discern the signs of the times that surround the region, but with a practical compromise; in terms of assessing their economic, social, political and cultural implications, seeing, listening and understanding from a

critical standpoint the realities our societies have to face in order to take key actions for a structural transformation at the service of integral human development and the care of our common home.

In doing so, we feel part of the process of definitely missionary conversion that Latin American Church is undergoing, inspired by the documents since Medellín to Aparecida, and, especially in recent times, by the contributions of Pope Francis magisterium, particularly his documents 'Dear Amazonia', 'Laudato si' and 'Fratelli Tutti'.

In this sense, this document examines the reality of Latin America and the Caribbean, taking up and expanding for our entire Region three of the four dreams Pope Francis has for the Amazonia: i) the "Ecological Dream", from which the Pope highlights the importance of rescuing, protecting and developing the overwhelming natural beauty of our common home; ii) the "Social Dream", from which he challenges us to fight for the rights of the poorest, of the least, making their voice heard and their dignity promoted; iii) the "Cultural Dream", which is the Pope's vision of a society that preserves cultural richness, where the diversity of beautiful human forms shines and progresses.

Human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself. According to the Bible, these three vital relationships have been broken, both outwardly and within us. This rupture is sin. (LS 66). Men and women are still capable of intervening positively. (LS 58); all is not lost. Human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good, and making a new start (LS 205). [Francis, 2015, Encyclical Letter Laudato Si', 58, 66, 205].

The pandemic is transforming the complex reality of our societies; the changes that the region and the entire interconnected world are starting to undergo, still remain to be. The crisis shows us that these changes will not necessarily make the world a better place if we do not prepare ourselves to see, judge and act appropriately. It is urgent that we design strategies to help the most vulnerable groups, who are at risk of suffering a serious humanitarian crisis.

Msgr. Jorge Lozano
Archbishop of San Juan de Cuyo
Secretary General of Celam



Our Social Debts

A. *The need of addressing aggravated structural problems*

Having arrived at this point, we can ask ourselves a question: how can the Church contribute to the solution of urgent social and political problems, and respond to the great challenge of poverty and destitution? The problems of Latin America and the Caribbean, like those of today's world, are multifaceted and complex, and they cannot be dealt with through generic programs. Undoubtedly, the fundamental question about the way that the Church, illuminated by faith in Christ, should react to these challenges, is one that concerns us all. In this context, we inevitably speak of the problem of structures, especially those which create injustice. In truth, just structures are a condition without which a just order in society is not possible.

Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI, V General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean. Aparecida, 2007.

Approaching the diagnosis of the current social situation faced by the Latin America and the Caribbean peoples, what first appears is the experience of human fragility at all levels. Experience of personal fragility, facing the death of loved ones, the fears of contagion and the way life can be so easily lost.

Fragility of interpersonal, family and community relationships. The fragility of institutions and, in general, of the system of life we lead has also become evident.

Latin American societies develop in the economic-financial field, multiplying social exclusions and depleting the vital sources that nature offers. Latin America and the Caribbean countries face challenges in various and complex political and social dimensions, both to answer on the pandemic time, and to project a post-pandemic change of course. As in other parts of the world, wealth is concentrated in the hands of great economic powers, speculation and financial return are dominating, ignoring the context in which they operate and the consequences of their actions. Market selfishness causes damage to our world even greater than the economic benefits it brings, losing sight of the reality of a limited and finite world, where the fragile is at the mercy of the market interests.

The spread of Covid-19 and its economic, social, political and environmental effects are aggravated by the region's structural problems: mainly, high levels of inequality, informal employment, lack of social protection, environmental degradation, poverty and vulnerability. The region is also characterized by weak and fragmented health and social protection systems, and expanding marginalized urban settlements lacking access to basic services. It also has large migratory flows and population displacements, as well as conflicts of various kinds, and the it is suffering disproportionately from the consequences of the climate crisis.

Covid-19 reaches a region marked by a matrix of social inequality, whose structuring axes - socioeconomic stratum, gender, stage of the life cycle, ethnic condition, territory, disability status and migratory status, among others - generate

scenarios of multiple and simultaneous exclusion and discrimination that result in greater vulnerability to the health, social and economic effects of this disease. In the health field, these inequalities are expressed in the coverage, effective access and results of health services, as well as in the structural conditions for health of individuals and communities.

However, inequalities are often hidden by problems related to the availability of information. Making inequality visible in the response to the pandemic is a key task for the exercise of social justice. In the current context, and from the social determinants of health perspective, the deterioration of household economic conditions, with the consequent increase in food insecurity (FAO/ ECLAC, 2020), could forge a vicious circle of poverty and poor health status of large sections of the population, which will have an impact on societies in the long term.

In particular, crisis times, social protection gaps can have a catastrophic impact on children and adolescents' integral development, with critical impacts on the exercise of their rights and the development of their human capabilities. Although they are not the most affected by the disease in terms of health, children, adolescents and young people will be perhaps one of the main victims of this crisis, due to the consequences that the temporary closure of educational centers and the effects of the economic and social crisis have on their households.

The effects of the pandemic on the living conditions of the population are enhanced by the gradual increase in poverty and extreme poverty, and the pace of decline in inequality observed in the five-year period prior to the coronavirus crisis is slowing. Despite the progress achieved in terms of poverty and inequality reduction and the expansion of the middle-income strata between 2002 and 2014, before the pandemic, economic and social progress in the region was already showing clear signs of stagnation, and peoples' discontent was growing. In the six-year period 2014-2019, the GDP of Latin America and the Caribbean had grown by an average of only 0.3% per year (ECLAC, 2020a), generating an

increase in indigence, poverty and inequality. Moreover, since the end of 2019, citizens in several countries had expressed their discomfort, discontent and dissatisfaction with the political system and its actors in large protest demonstrations demanding greater social justice.

The effects of the coronavirus disease pandemic (Covid-19) have spread to all spheres of social life in Latin America and the Caribbean, altering the way we relate to each other, paralyzing economies and generating deep changes in societies. Although the magnitude of the pandemic is constantly evolving, available data indicate that Latin America and the Caribbean has been one of the most affected regions of the world in terms of both the number of cases and deaths from the coronavirus disease. In 2020, the region accounted for only 8.4% of the world's population; by December of that year, it concentrated 18.6% of the accumulated Covid-19 infections and 27.8% of the deaths caused by this disease (ECLAC, 2021).

In 2020, projections regarding economic and social indicators for Latin America and the Caribbean show a very complex scenario, linked to both internal and external factors. To curb the spread of the coronavirus, prevent the overflow of health systems and reduce human losses, governments have adopted quarantine and physical distancing measures. In many cases, confinement of the population to their homes have been used as a way of minimizing contacts, especially those that could occur at close distances or in closed environments, which has been shown to increase the probability of contracting the virus. (ECLAC, 2020b).

As a result, entire sectors of the economy have seen their activity reduced or even temporarily dropped to zero, in line with the tightness of the measures adopted. On the other hand, demand for the region's export products fell sharply as a result of the adoption of similar measures in other parts of the world.

In this regard, ECLAC (2020a) has estimated that the GDP of all the economies of Latin America and the Caribbean will fall by 7.7%, and the unemployment rate will increase by 2.6 %

(ECLAC, 2020a). Each man or woman without jobs for reasons beyond his or her control represents a part of Creation left undone, a part of God's plan that has been thwarted³. This severe economic recession will mean a worsening of living conditions, as well as substantial increases in unemployment, poverty and inequalities.

In this way, the pandemic seems to exacerbate the great structural gaps in the region. There is no doubt that the costs of inequality have become unsustainable and that it is necessary to rebuild society with equality and sustainability, aiming at the creation of a true "good living" and of the "common good", a long overdue task in our region.

B. The need for an integral human ecology towards a sustainable good living

The best way to respect nature is to promote a human ecology open to transcendence, which, while respecting the person and the family, environments and cities, follows Paul's urging to recapitulate all things in Christ and praise the Father with Him (cf. 1 Cor 3:21-23). The Lord has entrusted the world to all, to members of present and future generations. The universal destiny of goods demands solidarity with both the present and future generations. Because resources are ever more limited, their use must be regulated according to a principle of distributive justice, while respecting sustainable development.

V General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops, 126, Aparecida, 2017

³ Cardinal Silva Henríquez, Raúl. Homily of May 1, 1977

Ecosystem disasters, human health effects and impacts on the economy and finances are all faces of the same crisis. For this reason, it is needed to move from a throwaway culture to a culture of care. A systemic change is required. Everything is intertwined.

In order to put these issues on the public agenda, it is essential to reveal, analyze and understand the social impact of an unprecedented crisis on the peoples of our region. To this end, throughout this document, we analyze the economic, social, political and environmental trends that preceded the pandemic and seek to measure its repercussions under the Covid-19 scenario in 2020, especially in terms of an integral ecology for the human, social and environmental sustainable development of the region. For this purpose, we address issues related to economic activity, employment, social security, poverty and inequality, as well as to the environment, health, human habitat, political life, with a particular focus on some sectors that constitute the "new social outcasts".

In this context, the world must move towards a model of integral ecology that seeks solutions to the problems of society along with the problems of the environment. In Pope Francis' view, the analysis of the typical problems of humanity, such as the family, work or the city, should not be carried out without considering the problems of the environment. There are not two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but a single and complex economic-social-environmental crisis⁴. This crisis must be resolved through the search for integral solutions, given that the problems we face are not isolated, but interact with one another.

The pandemic has exposed the failures and deficiencies of social protection systems and welfare regimes. But the role of public policy is also being revalued and the role of the State is being recognized as a key actor when it comes to meet the current challenges. The pandemic thus represents an opportunity to take a new public policy direction in order to build more equal and resilient societies through the

⁴ Francis (2015a). *op cit*

implementation of universal, redistributive and solidarity-based policies, with a rights-based approach (ECLAC, 2020b). Societies that respect people's dignity.

In particular, we hope that the crisis will help to foster consensus in our region on the need to build true States for "good living" and the "common good", as well as sustainable models of production and consumption. To emerge from the crisis, it is necessary to rethink the development model and consolidate the three dimensions of sustainable development: social, environmental and economic. Although the expected setbacks in social and economic terms seriously threaten the fulfillment of the Goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the pandemic has also highlighted the relevance of its central principles: the integrality of development and the interdependence of its dimensions, as well as the principle of "leaving no one behind".

Social policies have a central role to play as vanguard of change of the development model. From health, nutrition, cash transfers and social protection in general, social policies have been the protagonists of public action to mitigate deficiencies and meet the needs of the population in a context of health and economic crisis. They will play a fundamental role in the process of reconstruction beyond the emergency. In order to rebuild and transform society with equality and sustainability, it is essential to move towards decent work, foster co-responsibility in care and promote universal social protection, ensuring, among others, access to public health systems and quality pensions (ECLAC, 2020j).

In his latest encyclical letter, *Fratelli Tutti*, Francis calls us to reflect on the kind of solution that is given to the problem of poverty. Aid by means of money has to be considered as a temporary solution, while work allows the exercise of the dignity of the human person. Work must not only be viewed as the source of sustenance, but also as the channel for personal and collective growth⁵.

⁵ Francis (2020) *Encyclical Letter Fratelli Tutti on Fraternity and Social Friendship*. Vatican City.

The pandemic has shaken the status quo in many ways, and the current crisis can be seen as a "critical juncture", that is, an exceptional moment that redefines what is possible, even what is thinkable. This is because, in the face of extreme pressures, losses or risks, most actors become more willing than before to change the status quo, thus opening windows of political opportunity for social, economic and political change (Weyland, 2007 and 2008). In the context of the pandemic and its aftermath, the argument that all people need access to a basic level of welfare and income, regardless of their individual situation and characteristics, gains strength.

In the search for the common good, coordination between the State and social organizations is fundamental. The only way to build the common good is through the application of the principles of solidarity. States must place economies at the service of the people, and not the people at the service of the economy. However, there is currently little political support in the region for an economic system at the service of the people, aimed at integral human development, in which the impoverished and excluded play a leading role. Extractivism, speculation, productivism and economic selfishness still prevail.

The logic of spillover does not solve equity gaps since, since it does not include mechanisms to solve social problems. The fragility of economies shows that the free market is not always the most efficient antidote to cure an economy. An active economy must be promoted, one that favors productive diversity, generating trust and solidarity, which propagates the ideal of fraternity, especially with the poor and the excluded. To have a truly supportive economy implies rethinking social, political and economic participation, so as to include all popular movements attuned to the functioning of the State, seeking to awaken the experiences of solidarity from below. Institutions as a whole must be able to create dynamics that include, rather than exclude, those at the bottom of society.

C. The need for a Culture of Encounter

“There is no end to the building of a country’s social peace; rather, it is “an open-ended endeavour, a never-ending task that demands the commitment of everyone and challenges us to work tirelessly to build the unity of the nation. Despite obstacles, differences and varying perspectives on the way to achieve peaceful coexistence, this task summons us to persevere in the struggle to promote a ‘culture of encounter’.”

This requires us to place at the centre of all political, social and economic activity the human person, who enjoys the highest dignity, and respect for the common good. May this determination help us flee from the temptation for revenge and the satisfaction of short-term partisan interests”. [218] Violent public demonstrations, on one side or the other, do not help in finding solutions. Mainly because, as the Bishops of Colombia have rightly noted, the “origins and objectives of civil demonstrations are not always clear; certain forms of political manipulation are present and in some cases they have been exploited for partisan interests”. [219]”

Encyclical Letter Fratelli Tutti of the Holy Father Francis on Fraternity and Social Friendship, 232. Vatican City, 2020.

Faced with the complexity of social, cultural and environmental contexts, the People of God are challenged to be a Church on the move, a field hospital, a promoter of universal brotherhood and social friendship, of the culture of dialogue and encounter, of a new educational pact for a solidarity-based humanism, of new ways of building political and economic relations in harmony with our common home. Pope Francis invites us to build the “culture of encounter”, which is an art that has

as its core and protagonist the people who enthusiastically transmit their way of living and lifestyle. A Church ready to build bridges including everyone.

In the face of an exceptional situation such as the pandemic and of citizens’ demands for a more equal society in which rights are fully guaranteed, there is an opportunity for change. However, in order to go beyond a mere wishful appeal, it is important to make an urgent call for a new social pact as a political instrument for a truly structural change. In this sense, it is necessary to recover politics as an instrument of change, as a mechanism for deliberation, dissent and agreement, to generate public goods and lasting compacts.

The compact should be an explicit, representative and participatory process to address issues that have gone unanswered through the usual channels, thus building new bridges between society and the state. Two major components of a social covenant can be distinguished. On the one hand, the redistribution of resources and material opportunities to access wellbeing; on the other, the recognition of the identities and rights of specific population groups excluded or discriminated in the various spheres of social life.

Depending on the context, a socio-political pact may contain elements of both dimensions, or focus specifically on one of them. The social pact is a political instrument used to build consensus and agreements for medium and long term. It is based on a broad and participatory dialogue, in which the population as a whole plays a solid role. This dialogue today must start from the common space that the pandemic is placing us in, that is, our universal vulnerability under a health, economic and social crisis, which requires universal mechanisms for protection and mitigation.

The covenant presupposes that all stakeholders make a contribution and even that some of the most powerful stakeholders make important concessions in terms of their immediate interests, with a view to achieving a more stable, profitable, legitimate and sustainable situation for society as a whole. The historical experience indicates that although the

powerful stakeholders are by no means the only ones, they are indispensable interlocutors who must be actively involved and committed to the results.

The main social movements and sectors, from workers to the most marginalized members of society, must also be actively incorporated. It is essential to listen the voice of civil society, whose organizations are often at the forefront to push for citizens' demands, as well as to demand greater accountability from the State and, in general, from political actors. In this regard, young people are a force for change and transformation, even in the critical moments of the pandemic. Recognizing their wealth, their potential and their concrete contribution is fundamental to advance into societies that are truly oriented towards a new development model and a welfare state.

A new social contract must launch discussions and address issues relegated or even omitted by the main economic and political actors, with solidary responses in terms of costs and financing, and this requires fiscal pacts that promote progressive and sustainable fiscal policy, ensuring constant and sufficient resources for the wellbeing and resilience of the population.

Prior to the pandemic, the world was already operating in an unsustainable way. The difference is that today, more than ever before, the situation calls into question the world economic and political order which reproduces both the wealth of a few and the poverty of broad social sectors. The current situation opens up the opportunity to debate the historical feasibility of a human organization model based on "good living" and the "common good", in the economic, social and environmental spheres.

Likewise, the post-Covid-19 socioeconomic reconstruction is compelled to adopt a vision that aims at an integral ecological model, capable of finding solutions to society's problems along with those of the environment. The regional reality forces us to look beyond the immediate, seeking benefits for the whole of society, both present and future, trying to

incorporate a new model of economic production and circular social reproduction, to ensure human, economic, social and environmental sustainable development.

Our task is to reform the structures of society so that no one is excluded, pursuing the transformation of economies so that prosperous lives can be lived in harmony with the environment.

As we face the economic disasters produced by the pandemic, Pope Francis states that it is time to think creatively about an economy integrated into a political, social, cultural and popular project that seeks the common good in order to open the way to new opportunities (FT 178). The notion of recovery must not be satisfied with returning to an unequal and unsustainable model of economic and social life, in which a tiny minority of the world's population possesses half of the wealth.

"Land, lodging and labor for our brothers and sisters are sacred rights"

Address of The Holy Father to participants in the II World Meeting Of Popular Movements. Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, July 9, 2015 (excerpt).

Dear brothers and sisters, good afternoon! Today God has granted that we meet again. The Bible tells us that God hears the cry of his people, and I wish to join my voice to yours in calling for the three "Ls" for all our brothers and sisters: land, lodging and labor. I said it and I repeat it: these are sacred rights. It is important, it is well worth fighting for them. May the cry of the excluded be heard in Latin America and throughout the world.

Before all else: 1. Let us begin by acknowledging that change is needed. Here I would clarify, lest there be any misunderstanding, that I am speaking about problems common to all Latin Americans and, more generally, to humanity as a whole. They are global problems which today no one state can resolve on its own. With this clarification, I now propose that we ask the following questions: Do we truly realize that something is wrong in a world where there are so many farmworkers without land, so many families without a home, so many laborers without rights, so many

persons whose dignity is not respected? Do we realize that something is wrong where so many senseless wars are being fought and acts of fratricidal violence are taking place on our very doorstep? Do we realize something is wrong when the soil, water, air and living creatures of our world are under constant threat? So, if we do realize all this, let's not be afraid to say it: we need change; we want change. In your letters and in our meetings, you have mentioned the many forms of exclusion and injustice which you experience in the workplace, in neighborhoods and throughout the land. They are many and diverse, just as many and diverse are the ways in which you confront them. Yet there is an invisible thread joining every one of the forms of exclusion. These are not isolated issues. Can we recognize that invisible thread which links them? I wonder whether we can see that those destructive realities are part of a system which has become global. Do we realize that that system has imposed the mentality of profit at any price, with no concern for social exclusion or the destruction of nature? If such is the case, I would insist, let us not be afraid to say it: we want change, real change, structural change. This system is by now intolerable: farmworkers find it intolerable, laborers find it intolerable, communities find it intolerable, peoples find it intolerable. The earth itself – our sister, Mother Earth, as Saint Francis would say – also finds it intolerable. We want change in our lives, in our neighborhoods, in our everyday reality. We want a change which can affect the entire world, since global interdependence calls for global answers to local problems.

The globalization of hope, a hope which springs up from peoples and takes root among the poor, must replace the globalization of exclusion and indifference! Today I wish to reflect with you on the change we want and need. You know that recently I wrote about the problems of climate change. But now I would like to speak of change in another sense. Positive change, a change which is good for us, a change – we can say – which is redemptive. Because we need it.

I know that you are looking for change, and not just you alone: in my different meetings, in my different travels, I have sensed an expectation, a longing, a yearning for change, in people throughout the world. Even within that ever smaller minority which believes that the present system is beneficial, there is a widespread sense of dissatisfaction and even despondency. Many people are hoping for a change capable of releasing them from the bondage of individualism and the despondency it spawns. Time, my brothers and sisters, seems to be running out; we are not yet tearing one another apart, but we are tearing apart our common home. Today, the scientific community realizes what the poor have long told us: harm, perhaps irreversible harm, is being done to the ecosystem. The earth, entire peoples and individual persons are being brutally

punished. And behind all this pain, death and destruction there is the stench of what Basil of Caesarea – one of the first theologians of the Church – called “the dung of the devil”. An unfettered pursuit of money rules. This is the “dung of the devil”. The service of the common good is left behind. Once capital becomes an idol and guides people's decisions, once greed for money presides over the entire socioeconomic system, it ruins society, it condemns and enslaves men and women, it destroys human fraternity, it sets people against one another and, as we clearly see, it even puts at risk our common home, sister and mother earth. I do not need to go on describing the evil effects of this subtle dictatorship: you are well aware of them. Nor is it enough to point to the structural causes of today's social and environmental crisis.

I do not need to go on describing the evil effects of this subtle dictatorship: you are well aware of them. Nor is it enough to point to the structural causes of today's social and environmental crisis. We are suffering from an excess of diagnosis, which at times leads us to multiply words and to revel in pessimism and negativity. Looking at the daily news we think that there is nothing to be done, except to take care of ourselves and the little circle of our family and friends.

What can I do, as collector of paper, old clothes or used metal, a recycler, about all these problems if I barely make enough money to put food on the table? What can I do as a craftsman, a street vendor, a trucker, a downtrodden worker, if I don't even enjoy workers' rights? What can I do, a farmwife, a native woman, a fisher who can hardly fight the domination of the big corporations? What can I do from my little home, my shanty, my hamlet, my settlement, when I daily meet with discrimination and marginalization? What can be done by those students, those young people, those activists, those missionaries who come to a neighborhood with their hearts full of hopes and dreams, but without any real solution for their problems? They can do a lot. They really can. You, the lowly, the exploited, the poor and underprivileged, can do, and are doing, a lot. I would even say that the future of humanity is in great measure in your own hands, through your ability to organize and carry out creative alternatives, through your daily efforts to ensure the three “Ls” – do you agree? – (labor, lodging, land) and through your proactive participation in the great processes of change on the national, regional and global levels.

Don't lose heart!





Study summary

The Covid-19 pandemic arrives to Latin America in a highly complex scenario. Years of low economic growth have led to increased poverty and growing social tensions. Structural inequalities are deepening and can be seen in high levels of informal economy, lack of social protection and low productivity, as well as critical challenges in access to health, education and care.

More and more, the most vulnerable populations, such as children and adolescents, women, the elderly, indigenous peoples and Afro-Americans, the structurally unemployed, migrants, the chronically ill, people with non-heteronormative sexual orientation, among others, are being exposed to a multiplicity of aggressions.

This document consists of three sections aiming to analyze current conditions in the region. The first section, “Ecological Dream”, addresses the current situation of the economy, labor, social protection, the environment, climate change, population health status and health systems.

The second section, entitled “Social Dream”, analyzes poverty, inequality, social neglect, marginality and urban and ethnic-racial segregation, the new social outcasts (the elderly, migrants, indigenous peoples, discriminated ethnic-racial groups, people with disabilities, the urban poor, landless workers and people with substance abuse problems) and the fragile situation of children and adolescents. The last section, “Cultural Dreaming”, explores the status of democracies and human rights, as well as the changes taking place in our society.

1. Ecological Dream (Affecting aspects)

Economy, decent work and social protection

The current concentration of income and wealth occurs primarily through the mechanisms of the financial system. The freedom granted to financial investments favors speculative capital, which has no incentives to make long-term productive investments, but rather seeks immediate profit in transactions with public bonds, currencies, and derivatives. However, according to the Social Doctrine of the Church: “The economy has as its object the development of wealth and its progressive increase, not only in quantity but also in quality; this is morally correct if it is directed to man’s overall development in solidarity and to that of the society in which people live and work. Development, in fact, cannot be reduced to a mere process of accumulating goods and services. On the contrary, accumulation by itself, even were it for the common good, is not a sufficient condition for bringing about authentic human happiness” (CSDC, 334)

V General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops, 69. Aparecida, 2007

- ▶ International economic activity - taken as a measure of global output - has remained stagnant over the last ten years. The most advanced economies are on a downward trend, with growth of only 1.7% in 2019. Emerging and developing economies are also on a downward trend, with growth of 3.7% in 2019, marking a slowdown compared to the beginning of the decade.
- ▶ Estimated world economic growth for 2020 was 2.7%. The onset of Covid-19 pandemic and the shutdown of activity resulted in a 4.4% drop in world GDP, with even worse results for the most advanced countries (-5.8%). China's rapid recovery stands out, with growth of 1.9%. Global growth of 5.2% is forecast for 2021. Yet, product growth will not be enough to offset the losses in per capita GDP, which shows setbacks of up to ten years in the worst cases.
- ▶ During the first decade of the 21st century, Latin America and the Caribbean experienced a period of expansion, mainly due to beneficial international conditions for the export of primary products, marked by favorable terms of trade. But the 2010-2020 decade presents significant changes with respect to the previous one. To begin with, 23 of the 33 regional economies have been in decline since 2014. For the region as a whole, growth in 2019 was 0.0%, the lowest growth in the last forty years. In 2020, a drop of 8.1% is estimated, with even higher figures in tourism-dependent economies (-9.9%). In this context, a structural renewal of the economy will be necessary to mitigate the social and productive costs of the pandemic. Projected growth for 2021 is only 3.6%.
- ▶ A possible way out of the crisis is through strengthening of social economy, which includes companies or enterprises with limited profits, mutuals, foundations and non-profit organizations, economic associations, cooperatives, family economic units, peasant and indigenous communities production and marketing collectives, among others, that provide advantages and benefits for economic and social development (including better distribution of surpluses, efficient management of common goods, social and labor inclusion, among other benefits for the community).
- ▶ Labor markets have not had a different trend than the economy in the last decade: economic stagnation limits employment creation and increases unemployment levels. Unemployment rates have remained in a range between 8% and 10% of the working population in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). Informal employment rates have trended downward in 2020, but this is explained by the transition of informal workers to inactivity, due to lockdowns and restrictions of movement.
- ▶ Employment has also suffered the blows of the pandemic in the year 2020, and the most affected have been wage earners and informal workers. By 2020, employment is expected to fall by 2.6 percentage points from the previous year, with a worrying increase in unemployment. It is estimated that 47 million jobs will be lost, with an unemployment rate of 10%. The crisis has given new importance to the segmentation of the labor market. Employment was lower in the case of women, who in many cases were unable to reintegrate into their jobs due to the new demands of the household, and in the case of less educated people, whose activities were affected by the limitations on movement.
- ▶ New forms of work emerge from the Covid-19 experience. Teleworking has been the preferred option in offices and schools, although there is a long way to go before this modality of work can be extended to the entire population. In crisis times, it is important to remember that access to steady employment for all should be a prime objective. Since our creation, we have been called to work, for working is inherent to the meaning of life on this earth, a path to maturity, human development and personal fulfillment.
- ▶ Regarding social protection in the Region, the trend has been upward in the last decade, with significant advances in the coverage of traditionally excluded groups. By 2017, 61.4% of the Latin American population was covered by at least one social protection benefit. The onset of the health, social and economic crisis triggered by Covid-19 brought to the forefront the relevance of social protection systems in societies with high levels of vulnerability such as those in Latin America and the Caribbean. The

- ▶ pandemic prompted States to take a series of social protection measures, which can be grouped into five categories: cash transfers, transfers in kind, ensuring the provision of basic services, social protection for workers, and direct support for individuals and families.

Environment and climate change

Today the natural wealth of Latin America and the Caribbean is being subjected to an irrational exploitation that is leaving ruin and even death in its wake, throughout our region. A great deal of responsibility in this entire process must be attributed to the current economic model which prizes unfettered pursuit of riches over the life of individual persons and peoples and rational respect for nature. The devastation of our forests and biodiversity through a selfish predatory attitude, involves the moral responsibility of those who promote it because they are jeopardizing the life of millions of people, and particularly the milieu of peasants and indigenous, who are pushed out toward hillside lands and into large cities where they live overcrowded in the encircling rings of poverty. Our region needs to advance in its agroindustrial development toward appreciating the wealth of its lands and its human talents at the service of the common good, but we must mention the problems caused by the savage uncontrolled industrialization of our cities and the countryside, which is polluting the environment with all kinds of organic and chemical wastes. A similar warning must be made about resource-extraction industries which, when they fail to control and offset their harmful effects on the surrounding environment, destroy forests and contaminate water, and turn the areas exploited into vast deserts.

V General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops, 473. Aparecida, 2007

- ▶ The pandemic had environmental and climatic effects. The increase in temperature, water stress and greenhouse gas emissions had a brief pause during the isolation period. The decrease in tourism and productive activities resulted in less pressure on ecosystems, although it cannot be assumed that this situation will continue after the pandemic is over.
- ▶ Although the pandemic lowered the destruction of different ecosystems, the same did not happen with land degradation. Fires in much of the Amazon and in other regions of South America caused damage to vegetation cover. Indiscriminate logging for agriculture has not stopped during Covid-19: the Amazon lost 649 square kilometers of native forest during the isolation.
- ▶ It should not be overlooked that Covid-19 is an expression of climate change and its consequences on the world's ecosystems; it is just a symptom of a deeper situation. Changes in biomes are driving humans to become more in contact with species formerly far away from us increasing our vulnerability due to our closeness to new pathogens.
- ▶ This global dimension of climate change requires joint actions to prevent its worsening in the coming years, and coordinated actions by all the world's governments will be essential. Policies aimed to reduce carbon dioxide and other polluting gases, and to cut down the use of non-renewable energy sources, will be fundamental.
- ▶ Natural disasters were also a constant threat to the region: the destruction caused by the earthquake in Puerto Rico, the devastation caused by hurricanes Eta and Lota, and periods of drought in South America.

People's health and the health system

The Church has made an option for life. That option inevitably pushes us toward the furthest limits of existence: being born and dying, the child and the old person, the healthy person and the ill. St. Irenaeus tells us that "the glory of God is the living human being," even one who is weak, the recently conceived, the one worn out by the years and the sick person... 417

This twofold command has been fulfilled since the beginning of evangelization. The purpose of combating disease is to achieve physical, psychological, social, and spiritual harmony in order to carry out the mission received...418. Health is a topic that involves major forces in the world, but those forces do not provide a purpose that transcends it. In contemporary culture, there is no place for death, and in the face of its reality, efforts are made to conceal it...419

V General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops, 417-419. Aparecida, 20077

- ▶ Covid-19 forces us to examine the health status of people living in Latin America and the Caribbean. The most prevalent causes of mortality in the region are non-communicable diseases, such as cardiovascular diseases, cancer, diabetes, among others. There is also an increase in overweight and obesity, especially in Mexico and the Bahamas. These conditions become potential comorbidities for Covid-19, increasing the vulnerability of those who suffer them. About 186 million people in the Region are at risk of suffering from Covid-19.
- ▶ The figures have been increasing during 2020. Currently, the American continent has the highest number of cases, with more than 55 million infected and more than 1.2 million deaths. Countries with the highest numbers are Brazil, Argentina, Colombia, Mexico and Peru.

- ▶ Low investment in the sector has been a major constraint in dealing with Covid-19. This is evidenced by the overcrowding of clinics and hospitals, reaching maximum levels of occupancy of intensive care beds, as well as the lack of medical and nursing personnel to care for patients.
- ▶ The strategies adopted to combat the disease have been heterogeneous, but among the most widely adopted are: declaration of a state of sanitary emergency, closure of international borders, promotion of more rigorous personal hygiene measures, search and control of suspected cases, isolation and social distancing measures, mandatory use of masks, restriction of travel schedules, transportation restrictions.
- ▶ Vaccination against Covid-19 is the current priority of governments to confront the pandemic. In this regard, Pope Francis has warned about the need to ensure that immunization reaches every corner of the planet, including the most disadvantaged, who are often forgotten by the corporations that supply vaccines.

2. Social Dream (Affecting aspects)

Inequality, poverty, and social deprivation

Led by a tendency that prizes profit and stimulates competition, globalization entails a process of concentration of power and wealth in the hands of a few, not only of physical and monetary resources, but especially of information and human resources. The upshot is the exclusion of all those not sufficiently trained and informed, thereby augmenting the inequalities that sadly characterizes our continent and that keep

large numbers of people in poverty...(62). A globalization without solidarity has a negative impact on the poorest groups. It is no longer simply the phenomenon of exploitation and oppression, but something new: social exclusion. What is affected is the very root of belonging to the society in which one lives, because one is no longer on the bottom, on the margins, or powerless, but rather one is living outside. The excluded are not simply “exploited” but “surplus” and “disposable” (65).

V General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops, 417-419. Aparecida, 2007

- ▶ Poverty has been and continues to be one of the greatest problems facing Latin American and Caribbean countries. The solution, according to Pope Francis, requires governments to think and act in terms of community. Permanent solutions do not come from containment strategies aimed to temporarily overcome the condition of poverty. It is essential to take charge of the present in its most marginal and distressing condition, and being able to give back their dignity to the poor people.
- ▶ In the last two decades there have been advances and setbacks in the fight against poverty. The highest figures were reported in 2002, when nearly half of the Latin American population lived in poverty. In the following years, the trend was downward, accompanied by the economic growth of the 2000-2010 decade. But from 2014 onwards, the figures began to rise in almost the entire region, mainly due to the rise of poverty in Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina and Ecuador.
- ▶ In 2019, 30.5% of the regional population was poor, and 11.3% lived in conditions of extreme poverty. The region presents very heterogeneous figures: countries such as Mexico and Honduras with figures around 50% poverty, in contrast to the situation of a country like Uruguay, with about 5% of its population living in poverty.
- ▶ The arrival of COVID, associated to economic decline and rising unemployment, further deteriorates the overall condition of poverty in the region. ECLAC estimated that by the year 2020, 33.7% of Latin Americans would be poor, and 12.5% would be extremely poor. This figure is similar to the regional poverty figure for 2008, while the extreme poverty level is the highest since 1999. In a scenario lacking social programs (also calculated by ECLAC), poverty would reach 37.2% of the population and extreme poverty 15.8%.
- ▶ Brazil's situation stands out among the countries, as it has achieved a decrease in poverty even in a pandemic situation. The worst case has been Argentina, with a 9.8% increase in poverty compared to the previous year. In terms of extreme poverty, Brazil achieved a 4.1% reduction over the previous year, while in Honduras the increase was 6.1%.
- ▶ In a context of increasing poverty, the result will also be an increased inequality. Latin America was already the most unequal region in the world.
- ▶ The Gini index (measurement of income inequality that exists among citizens, where 0 is a situation of extreme equality and 1 is a situation of absolute inequality) was 0.460 on average for LAC in 2019, including countries with indexes lower than 0.400 (Argentina and Uruguay) and countries with indexes higher than 0.520 (Brazil and Colombia).
- ▶ The region entered the pandemic with three severe structural problems: high informality, high inequality and low productivity, which interact with each other to make the region particularly vulnerable to negative economic shocks. Between 2019 and 2020 ECLAC estimates regressive variations in all countries in the region. Countries with the lowest variation would be Guatemala and Paraguay (between 1% and 1.9% variation), while countries with the highest variation would be Argentina, Ecuador and Peru (6% or more in Gini).

- ▶ As mentioned, the region showed significant progress in social protection, but improvements came about in a fragmented pattern. By 2019, 38.9% of Latin Americans and Caribbeans did not have access to any kind of social protection, which means a condition of socioeconomic deprivation. Deprivations suffered by people left out of social protection are not solved only through monetary transfers: situations of overcrowding, informality, marginality and discrimination are also indicators of helplessness.

Marginalization, social exclusion and segregation

This broad concern for human dignity is the source of our anguish over the millions of Latin American men and women who cannot lead a life that responds to this dignity. The preferential option for the poor is one of the distinguishing features of our Latin American and Caribbean church. Indeed, addressing our continent Pope John Paul II stated that for the Christian people of America conversion to the Gospel means to revise “all the different areas and aspects of life, especially those related to the social order and the pursuit of the common good.”

V General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops, 391. Aparecida, 2007

- ▶ Overcrowding and informal settlements are commonplace in all countries of the region. Location is an element that reinforces inequality. Life in the cities provides more opportunities than life in the suburbs and remote areas. Interregional disparities arise from income disparities: low-income families tend to locate in the periphery, while high-income households locate in the city.
- ▶ Most countries in Latin America and the Caribbean exhibit large income disparities between regions. These interregional disparities seem similar when measured at the household level—using per capita income—or when average wages are used. Interregional gaps are larger in richer countries than in poorer countries.
- ▶ In particular, the region stands out for the high proportion of the population residing in informal settlements. In most severe cases (Nicaragua, Bolivia and Guatemala), more than 40% of the urban population lives in such settlements. The arrival of Covid-19 in these settlements lacking basic housing conditions generates a faster spread of the disease, increasing their vulnerability due to high levels of overcrowding and the absence of basic sanitation services.
- ▶ Another important historical problem in our region is racial segregation. The sociodemographic picture is complex due to the mixture of different ethnic groups. Segregation is manifested through low school enrollment and difficulties regarding insertion in the formal labor market. The social setting of Covid-19 had the greatest impact on communities and groups marginalized because of race, nationality or ethnic status, which historically have been outside the social protection systems.
- ▶ Language barriers have been one of the obstacles hindering access to social protection mechanisms as well as to education and other benefits. Many communities of native peoples, unable to use the same language mostly spoken in the country in which they reside, have had further obstacles accessing education or social security programs. Besides the impact on the health of Afrodescendants and other national or ethnic minorities, in the context of the current crisis there has been also a significant increase in racial slurs, harassment and violence in the public space, particularly directed against people of Asian origin.

The new social outcasts

Globalization is causing the emergence of new faces of the poor in our peoples. With special attention and in continuity with our previous General Conferences, we focus our attention on the faces of the new excluded: migrants, victims of violence, displaced people and refugees, victims of human trafficking and kidnappings, the disappeared, people sick with HIV and endemic diseases, drug addicts, adults, boys and girls who are victims of prostitution, pornography and violence or of child labor, abused women, victims of exclusion and traffic for sexual exploitation, differently-abled people, large groups of unemployed men and women, those excluded by technological illiteracy, street people in large cities, the indigenous and Afro-Americans, landless peasants and miners. Through its social ministry the Church should welcome and journey with these excluded people in the appropriate environments.

V General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops, 402. Aparecida, 2007

- ▶ In the context of increasing poverty, inequality and marginalization, the situation of social outcasts worsens. The logic of discarding marginalizes certain groups of society considered unnecessary, and this situation worsens during the pandemic. It is important to remember the need to shift away from this logic and replace it with a new vision, a logic of communion, which moves away from exclusion.
- ▶ Elderly people, migrants, native peoples, people with disabilities and substance abuse problems, and landless peasants see their living conditions worsen in the face of the pandemic. In the case of older adults, the disease strikes them in a condition of greater physical

vulnerability to the virus. Chronic pathologies and increased functional limitations further compromise their ability to cope with Covid.

- ▶ At the regional level, older adults account for most fatalities due to Covid-19. In Colombia, Mexico and Costa Rica, between 60% and 70% of Covid-19 related deaths have been in people over 60 years of age. These figures are higher in Argentina and Chile, close to 85%.
- ▶ Migrants represent an often invisible drama, posing a challenge to societies, States and Churches. At the time, Pope Francis spoke of the need to welcome, protect, promote and integrate displaced people. In 2019, 40.5 million people in the region were in a migrant status. Two main migration flows are recognized at the interregional level: mobility from Central American countries to Mexico and the United States, and Venezuelan mobility to the Southern Cone countries. Another important migration flow, although smaller, is Haitian migration to the Dominican Republic, Cuba and the United States.
- ▶ Migrations in the Covid-19 context are limited because of border closures and quarantine measures, although it should not be assumed that mobility is constrained by these factors, given the involuntary and forced nature of interregional migration. Groups particularly vulnerable to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, in addition to undocumented migrants or those in an irregular migratory situation, include women, children and adolescents, as well as people with a non-heteronormative sexual orientation.
- ▶ Indigenous peoples represent 9.8% of the regional population, and are also the population with the highest rate of poverty, mainly concentrated in rural areas and remote territories. In all countries of the region, there are indigenous communities at high risk due to their lower immune resistance and lack of access to hospital care. Living far from hospitals and media attention, Latin America's indigenous people fall ill and die without access to the essential means to protect themselves.

- ▶ As for landless peasant workers, rural poverty is generally associated with the deficit of decent work in agriculture. Inequality in land distribution is made evident through accumulation of resources by certain privileged groups and individuals. During the first months of the year 2020, the pandemic caused a drop in the production and export of agricultural products, generating income losses.
- ▶ The most vulnerable groups in society, the elderly, women, indigenous peoples and the poor, already among the most excluded segments of the society, are also populations with the highest proportion of people with disabilities. In many ways, their exclusion is magnified by living in this situation.
- ▶ People with disabilities are at greater risk to Covid-19 because of their limited capacity to protect themselves from infection or to seek diagnosis and treatment due to the lack of information about the virus in accessible formats and the poor accessibility of health facilities. Covid-19 has a cumulative effect on people with disabilities, since the structural disadvantages that existed prior to the pandemic are reinforced in the absence of actions to safeguard the health and well-being of vulnerable groups. A similar situation occurs in people with substance use problems, as they are physically more vulnerable to Covid-19.

Children's and adolescents' situation

We are pained to see the situation of poverty, domestic violence (especially in out-of-wedlock or broken families), sexual abuse, affecting a large number of our children: child labor, street children, children with HIV, orphans, child soldiers, boys and girls deceived and exposed to pornography and forced prostitution, both virtual and real. Early childhood (0 to 6 years) is especially in need of special attention and care.

One cannot remain indifferent to the suffering of so many innocent children... However, we note with concern that vast numbers of young people in our continent are living in situations that impact them significantly: consequences of poverty that constrain the harmonious growth of their lives and cause exclusion; socialization in which values are no longer passed on primarily in traditional institutions but in new environments with a strong dosage of alienation; and their susceptibility to the new types of cultural expression resulting from globalization, which affects their own personal and social identity.

V General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops, 439, 444. Aparecida, 2007

- ▶ It is also important to mention the situation of one of the groups most affected by the pandemic, which tends to be invisible: the 193 million children and adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean. It is estimated that in 2019, 47.2% of these age groups were living in poverty, and 19.6% in extreme poverty. These children are the future of the human family and it is everyone's responsibility to favor their integral development.
- ▶ With respect to children's food consumption, there has been a transition to a higher intake of sugars and fats, resulting in child malnutrition and an increase in overweight. At the other extreme, many children suffer from wasting and lack of vitamins and minerals. The consequences of poor nutrition in childhood have lifelong consequences. Good nutrition in infancy is critical for cognitive development in childhood and adulthood.
- ▶ The COVID-19 pandemic has generated a "hunger pandemic" in our region. School closures resulted in the suspension of many of the school feeding programs that benefit 85 million children in the region. For some 10 million children, school feeding is one of the main sources of safe food they receive each day.

- ▶ Education is a topic that has been mentioned extensively during the pandemic, and represents one of the major concerns for the future. The regional trend over the last decade has been to increase schooling at the pre-primary, primary and secondary levels. The closure of educational centers resulted in the cessation of school attendance by millions of students, from pre-school to tertiary level.
- ▶ The most serious consequence of the pandemic will not only be the economic situation, but also the impact on human capital building processes. It is estimated that more than 170 days of learning were lost in Latin America and the Caribbean (the world average is 40 days), increasing the risk of losing an entire academic year.
- ▶ Distance learning, although adequate to overcome short-term problems, is unsustainable in most countries of the region. With high levels of poverty and marginalization, Latin American societies do not have the technological conditions to support the teaching process.
- ▶ When speaking of children's situation, we must mention the problem of child labor and exploitation, as serious expressions of inequality. Our region has made the greater progress towards eradication of child labor having reduced the number of working children by more than 9.5 million. However, in 2016 there were still more than 17 million children engaged in economic activities in the region.
- ▶ Covid-19 has exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities: the production slowdown, unemployment, low social protection coverage, lack of access to social security and higher levels of poverty all contribute to an increase in child labor.
- ▶ With regard to child vulnerability, we must also refer to domestic violence against children in our region. Violence results from multiple social, economic, cultural, political and environmental factors acting at the individual, family and community levels. It has many expressions, whether physical, sexual or emotional. In our region, one out of every two children under 15 years of age is subjected to some type of corporal punishment at home; two out of every three children experience some kind of violent discipline, whether physical or psychological. More than one million adolescent girls between the ages of 15 and 19 years old have experienced some type of sexual violence.
- ▶ The coronavirus pandemic creates an environment conducive to increased violence. Economic activity limitations, school closures, reduced access to health services, and physical distancing can increase vulnerability and exposure of children and adolescents to violence.
- ▶ One problem stemming from the levels of violence in Latin America and the Caribbean is teenage motherhood: our region has the second highest teenage pregnancy rate in the world. Early pregnancy has consequences for poor pregnant girls and adolescents. Complications caused by pregnancy and childbirth are among the leading causes of maternal mortality.
- ▶ The start of Covid-19 raises alarm bells about the problem of teenage motherhood. The closures of schools and other educational centers result in girls and adolescents spending more time at home, increasing their exposure to abusive family members.

3. Cultural Dream (Affecting aspects)

Social peace, democracy and human rights

It is therefore not through opportunism nor thirst for novelty that the Church, "the expert in humanity" (Paul VI, Address to the United Nations, 4 October 1965) defends human rights. It is through a true evangelical commitment, which, as happened with Christ, is a commitment to the most needy.

Address of John Paul II, III General Conference of Latin America and the Caribbean Episcopate, Puebla, 1979.

Structures must be created to firmly establish a social, economic, and political order without inequity, and with opportunities for all. New structures must likewise be created to promote a genuine human coexistence, prevent arrogant domination by some, and facilitate constructive dialogue for the necessary social consensus.

V General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops, 384, 444. Aparecida, 2007

- ▶ Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16, Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, aims to promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies. Latin America and the Caribbean still face a great challenge in developing a true democratic culture. The persistent inequality and social unrest, along with the political instability, institutional weakness, corruption and insecurity which characterize the region, have resulted in low levels of trust in institutions or authorities and little engagement of citizens, who are increasingly dissatisfied and skeptical about democracy.
- ▶ The year 2019 brought several crises to countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. The region was affected by a series of economic, political and social conflicts. Despite the pandemic, the events that began in 2019 were reactivated in several countries of the region. Covid-19, rather than retracting the conflictivity, boosted the political instability of most of the governments in the region.
- ▶ Satisfaction with democracy is becoming weaker and weaker. In 2008, dissatisfaction was 51%, and this figure rose to 71% in 2018. No country in the region has a satisfied majority. Measurements in LAC for the year 2020 result in a setback, so that most countries in the region are considered as “imperfect or deficient democracies”. Only Costa Rica, Chile and Uruguay are valued as “full democracies”.
- ▶ In the Covid-19 context, there are a number of risk factors for democracies: the loss of independence of the judiciary, limited access to justice, restrictions and setbacks in freedom of expression, and the low representativeness of elected governments. It will be essential in the coming years to overcome these problems in order to strengthen democracies. Even so, it is pertinent to point out a remark made by the Holy Father on the current situation of the countries of our region: “there is no democracy with hunger, nor development with poverty”.
- ▶ The states of emergency led to increased executive powers in a region that structurally tends to hyper-presidentialism. The broadening of powers to spend emergency funds increases the risk of favoring populist measures to deal with the economic consequences of the pandemic in order to gain public support.
- ▶ Several elections will take place this year. In Ecuador, Guillermo Lasso has been proclaimed the winner of the elections. He obtained 52.5% of the votes, compared to 47.5% for Arauz, who is very close to President Correa⁶. In Peru, close results will lead to runoff elections for Keiko Fujimori (14.5%) and Pedro Castillo (18.1%), candidates of the extreme right and extreme left, respectively⁷. In Bolivia, the governors’ elections resulted in disadvantages for the ruling party, led by Luis Arce.
- ▶ Public opinion polls prepared by the Latin American Strategic Center for Geopolitics (CELAG) in March 2021 have had strong results on the approval or rejection of the current presidents of Chile, Argentina and Peru. In the Chilean case, President Sebastián Piñera has a 72.1% negative image, compared to 18.1% positive; in Argentina, President Alberto Fernández has a 50.1%

⁶ Galindo, J. (April 11, 2021). *Ecuador, entre la vieja polarización y el nuevo descontento.*

⁷ BBC News Mundo (12 de abril de 2021). *Elecciones 2021 Perú: la ajustada carrera para definir qué candidatos pasan a segunda vuelta.*

positive image and 48.8% negative image; in Peru, 58.9% of those surveyed have a negative image of President Francisco Sagasti, compared to 27.8% positive.

- ▶ Inequality, corruption, violence, environmental degradation and the weakening of institutions are a common reality in our region. For thousands of people, these situations turn into daily human rights violations. Latin America and the Caribbean is one of the most dangerous regions in the world in terms of human rights.
- ▶ 2019 was marked by mass protests at the regional level, which were mostly peaceful. The authorities generally made use of repression, excessive use of force and other human rights violations. The most affected groups are migrants, social movements for housing, land and labor, the urban and rural poor, and even journalists.
- ▶ Covid-19 comes to a region where rights are structurally undermined. In addition to deficiencies existing for years, there is an imperative need to guarantee the right to health for all citizens. The prevailing model in the region does not satisfy the right to health that States must guarantee by law.
- ▶ With regard to the functioning of the State during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is also worth mentioning the situation of corruption, an ailment of democracy that affects many countries in the region.
- ▶ Every year, Transparency International establishes the corruption perception index, in which figures close to 0 indicate a higher level of corruption, and figures close to 100 indicate that there is no corruption at all.
- ▶ In 2020, 32 countries in our region were evaluated, resulting in an average of 43/100. Uruguay is the highest figure in Latin America and the Caribbean with a score of 71/100, and Nicaragua, Haiti and Venezuela the countries with the worst regional corruption, with scores between 10/100 and 20/100.

- ▶ Corruption permeates every action against Covid-19, from bribery for tests, treatments and other health services, to the procurement of health supplies and emergency preparedness in general.
- ▶ Corruption diverts funds needed for investment in healthcare, leaving populations without doctors, medical supplies, medicines and sometimes without clinics and hospitals.
- ▶

Social changes in family, gender and generational relationships

The younger generations are those most affected by this consumer culture in their deep personal aspirations. They grow up under the thrust of a pragmatic and narcissistic individualism, which arouses in them special imaginary worlds of freedom and equality. They affirm the present because the past ceased being relevant in the face of so much social political, and economic exclusion.

For them, the future is uncertain. They likewise participate in the logic of life as spectacle, and regard the body as focal point of their present reality... New actors are emerging in within this situation of cultural change, with new lifestyles, ways of thinking, feeling, and perceiving, and with new ways of relating. They are authors and agents of the new culture (51)... Among the positive aspects of this cultural change is the fundamental value of the person, his or her conscience and experience, the search for the meaning of life and transcendence.

V General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops, 51, 52. Aparecida, 2007



- ▶ The cultural dream makes us also consider changes in family, gender and generational relationships. Situations previously invisible now take on greater relevance, such as gender, family relationships and changes in the ways in which generations relate to each other.
- ▶ The structure of the family has undergone changes in recent decades: two-parent households have decreased, extended households include more family members, and single-parent households have been on the rise. This increase results from several factors, such as the higher number of divorces, longer single status, and increased migration of family members.
- ▶ Covid-19 imposes changes in family functioning, ranging from changes in daily life due to the period of isolation, economic adjustments resulting from the economic downturn, to an increase in intrafamily violence as a consequence of confinement.
- ▶ The pandemic also generates changes in relationships among generations. Families have been forced to part from the spaces shared with their elders to avoid contagion possibilities. Families who do not live together had to adapt to the times of separation, going weeks without seeing their elders or limiting visiting time.
- ▶ Covid-19 also calls us to reflect on changes in gender relations. The people who identify and recognize -publicly or not- some sexual orientation or non-heteronormative gender identity experience situations of discrimination, violence and inequality. It is worth bearing in mind that 24 of the 35 countries in the Americas do not recognize marriage or civil union between persons of the same sex, nor do they have a law prohibiting discrimination against such persons.
- ▶ Pope Francis has spoken out on this issue, showing his support for civil unions between persons of the same sex, granting a legal coverage. People with non-heteronormative sexual orientation are a vulnerable group to Covid-19 because in some countries they are an excluded minority, suffering the health and socioeconomic consequences derived from the pandemic.
- ▶ Finally, when mentioning changes in our society, it is also relevant to mention violence toward women. The reality of women's lives is defined by structural elements that interact with gender, such as income levels, educational levels, pregnancy and family, ethnicity and race, as well as factors that are external, such as inequalities in employment and gender-based violence. During the pandemic, violence against women and girls might have increased in the region due to conditions of social isolation.



Theological-Pastoral Contribution

Introduzione⁸

Upon the current diagnosis of the socio-economic and environmental situation in Latin America and the Caribbean, the need to re-read this reality from a theological and pastoral perspective arises. This is a reassessment from the standpoint of our faith in the Lord who raises us and gives us new life amidst the complexity of these realities, impelling our history towards the fullness of His Kingdom⁹: “Know that I am with you always until the end of time” (Mt 28:20).

A missionary disciples’ look to our reality enables us to recognize, with the eyes of faith, the signs of the Lord’s merciful presence, the plans He has for us, and His invitation to follow and serve Him. It is a matter of recognizing his salvation work in and through history, as every era has demanded the believers’ community to do so.

The practice of evangelical and pastoral discernment upon the complexity of the social, cultural and environmental contexts of our continent and in times of pandemic, should reveal us towards which direction is oriented in them the action of the Lord, crucified and risen, and towards where he is calling us to love him and follow him as a Latin American and Caribbean Church.

⁸ This document was prepared by Jaime Mancera Casas and María del Pilar Silveira, members of Celam’s Theological and Pastoral Reflection Team.

⁹ Cf. DP 274

This is about understanding how to bring to life here in our land the commitment with the call addressed to all the Christian faithful to be a Church going out, a field hospital, a promoter of universal brotherhood and social friendship, of a dialogue and encounter culture, of a new educational pact for a solidarity-based humanism, promoter of new ways to build political and economic relations in harmony with the common home, continuing the action of the Risen Lord

Reading the data and analysis from the perspective of the Gospel and of our faith, and guided by the Holy Spirit, we move from an awareness of the situation to an urging of our responsible freedom, to a recognition of God’s call for us to work together as an ecclesial community to extend his kingdom amidst these circumstances.

This Gospel discernment is based on trust in the love of Jesus Christ, who always and tirelessly cares for his Church (cf. Eph. 5:29), he the Lord and Master, the key, the center and the purpose of the whole of human history.(17) This discernment is nourished by the light and strength of the Holy Spirit who evokes everywhere and in all circumstances, obedience to the faith, the joyous courage of following Jesus, and the gift of wisdom, which judges all things and is judged by no one (cf. 1 Cor. 2:15). It rests on the fidelity of the Father to his promises (PDV,10)

The following reflections are not intended, by any means, to exhaust the possibilities for evangelical discernment of the current situation. On the contrary, they are an invitation to carry out many exercises of discernment from the different

contexts of our geography and to share them, so that the voice of the Lord may resound from every corner and confirm us in what he is expecting from missionary discipleship for the whole humanity. But, above all, we hope that the dialogical, reflective and interpretative encounter with reality, in the light of faith, will lead us to a committed, synodal and merciful action, according to the will of the Lord.

The human fragility experience

As we approach the diagnosis of the current situation in our continent, as we read and reread the data and analyses, what it first appear, as we have expressed in other reflective exercises, is the experience of human fragility at all levels.

The experience of personal fragility, when faced with family and loved ones' death, the fears of contagion and when seeing how life can so easily be lost. Fragility from uncertainty about one's own ability to face difficulties, keep serenity or the sense of personal life amidst adversities. The increasing numbers of situations of neglect of self-care, emotional crisis, depression, suicidal ideations, post- traumatic stress, aggressiveness, speak of this fact.

The fragility of interpersonal, family and community relationships made evident by the forced home confinement, closure of stores and industries, and the restrictions on daily social life. Lack of in-depth communication, an inability to face problems together and to build a mature coexistence, individualistic responses, intra-family and social violence, poor conflict management skills, indifference or denial of severity of the situation also appeared frequently.

And also the fragility of institutions and of models that currently rule the different systems of social life. Fragility of the current economic model based on production and consumption, and that of the informal economy. Fragility of governments' political decisions, which have fallen short in

the face of the severity and extent of the crisis, not being able to manage the current situation as a whole. This fragility casts a strong question mark over the legitimacy of these current political and economic models and leads us to conclude that it is imperative to rethink ourselves in other terms, with more joint action between countries and new ways to build social relations.

We have also experienced fragility within the ecclesial life; in all spheres of its life of communion and in its evangelizing actions. Therefore, this is an experience of fragility in all fields and levels of human life, which contrasts with the vision of self-sufficiency, security, life and consumption without limits that society offers us, especially on the basis of scientific, technological and communicative development.

The storm exposes our vulnerability and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities. It shows us how we have allowed to become dull and feeble the very things that nourish, sustain and strengthen our lives and our communities. The tempest lays bare all our prepackaged ideas and forgetfulness of what nourishes our people's souls; all those attempts that anesthetize us with ways of thinking and acting that supposedly "save" us, but instead prove incapable of putting us in touch with our roots and keeping alive the memory of those who have gone before us. We deprive ourselves of the antibodies we need to confront adversity.

But this is an experience that, rather than pulling us down, has become an opportunity to reencounter the truth of our lives, to get up and give a new direction to life, as Pope Francis pointed out: "In this storm, the façade of those stereotypes with which we camouflaged our egos, always worrying about our image, has fallen away, uncovering once more that (blessed) common belonging, of which we cannot be deprived: our belonging as brothers and sisters¹⁰.

¹⁰ Pope Francis, *Extraordinary Moment of Prayer in Pandemic Times*, Friday, 27 March.

Living this experience guided by faith helps us to assume our existence with greater realism and to open ourselves to the experience of the Risen Lord's salvific presence in our own lives.

Experiencing the salvific presence of the Risen One

The diagnosis carried out, shows us the social, cultural, economic, environmental and political crisis we are experiencing, and so tells us about many victims, brothers and sisters, who are suffering the negative impacts of this situation, and who are certainly subjects of the Risen Lord's careful attention, since He has shown us his preference for those who suffer, for those who most experience their own fragility as a consequence of injustice. Hence, they refer us to confess the presence of the Lord in the midst of the lights and shadows of the moment we are living.

We recognize the Risen Jesus becoming close and compassionate to so many victims of these crises, to so many suffering people, bearing their crosses and those of their families: the sick and especially those not well cared for, without access to or excluded from health services; families who have lost loved ones because of the pandemic; the unemployed, informal workers, or those who have lost their jobs; migrants, displaced persons and victims of natural disasters; people who have fallen into depression, nervous breakdowns, suicidal ideation; families wounded or separated because of violence in their relationships, and so on. A presence mediated by so many who have sympathized and listened, reached out, lent a hand. Or by those who have fulfilled their work, such as doctors, nurses, health personnel, public employees, Police and Army officers and supply personnel.

A Risen Jesus close to so many who are victims of an economic system that only promotes profit and accumulation of money, disregarding human dignity, common good, and care for the common home, and which ends up turning people into objects of exploitation, of manipulation in pursuit of particular material interests.

Close to the cry of the earth because of its devastation, because of limitless extractivism, of logging in Amazonia and many other places, of water pollution and because of poor management of solid waste, and of climate change.

We recognize the Risen Jesus arousing in many people compassion and commitment to charity, mitigating the impact of the pandemic in many ways. We recognize Him promoting initiatives and solidarity networks which complement governments' efforts to deal with the pandemic's impacts, although these efforts have been not enough to meet all the needs. We also recognize him arousing small initiatives that have helped many families to survive in the midst of the crisis, and sustained Hope in many others. Deeds that, of course, do not have figures nor do they are reported in newspapers or newscasts.

We recognize it is the Risen Jesus who is making many aware of the humanitarian crises that exist and have not yet been addressed, of the severe negative effects caused by the current economic models, along with the political decisions that are made without considering the truth behind each situation and the way in which everything is interconnected. It is the Risen One who has helped us to become aware of the lack of guarantees for the exercise and satisfaction of many fundamental rights, even before the pandemic. As one journalist noted: "We have learned that there was not a single intensive care unit in many places of our country". This awareness is beginning to move hearts and drive change processes. Small, like a mustard seed, yet they can grow and become the source of great transformations.

Especially through the prophetic action of Pope Francis, the Risen Lord generates in us a critical awareness of the severity of the problems we are facing, as well as the need and possibility of undertaking actions for change, structural and concrete, institutional, communitarian and personal, to turn this crisis into an opportunity. It is a matter of choosing to come out better, and to really achieve it together. In order to fulfill this purpose, He motivates attitudes and gestures of hope in many people, particularly in children and young people, transforming them into fresh air in the midst of the depression, sadness and skepticism that abound these days.

Pope Francis tells us:

The Lord asks us and, in the midst of our tempest, invites us to reawaken and put into practice that solidarity and hope capable of giving strength, support and meaning to these hours when everything seems to be floundering. The Lord awakens so as to reawaken and revive our Easter faith. We have an anchor: by his cross we have been saved. We have a rudder: by his cross we have been redeemed. We have a hope: by his cross we have been healed and embraced so that nothing and no one can separate us from his redeeming love. In the midst of isolation when we are suffering from a lack of tenderness and chances to meet up, and we experience the loss of so many things, let us once again listen to the proclamation that saves us: he is risen and is living by our side. The Lord asks us from his cross to rediscover the life that awaits us, to look towards those who look to us, to strengthen, recognize and foster the grace that lives within us. Let us not quench the wavering flame (cf. Is 42:3) that never falters, and let us allow hope to be rekindled.

Embracing his cross means finding the courage to embrace all the hardships of the present time, abandoning for a moment our eagerness for power and possessions in order to make room for the creativity that only the Spirit is capable of inspiring. It means finding the courage to create spaces where everyone can recognize that they are called, and to allow new forms of hospitality, fraternity and solidarity. By his cross we have been saved in order to embrace hope and let it strengthen and sustain all measures and all possible avenues for helping us protect ourselves and others. Embracing the Lord in order to embrace hope: that is the strength of faith, which frees us from fear and gives us hope¹¹.

¹¹ Pope Francis, *Extraordinary Moment of Prayer in Pandemic Times*, Friday, 27 March..

The Church and its service to the contemporary world

The experience of the Risen One along with the cry of the victims challenge us and call us to reaffirm our commitment to the life of communion and to the evangelizing mission that we must all assume being Church as we all are. The Church, as the people of God, also recognizes that she is in solidarity with all peoples and their history, and knows that she is called to share joys, hopes, grieves and anxieties (cf. GS1); therefore, by presenting us a particularly complex and dramatic situation, this data invites us to reflect on ourselves as believers, on what we have done, on what we can do and on what the Lord expects of us at this moment. There can be many questions, but we can group them together, recognize them, understand them following the criteria of *Gaudium et Spes* from these three approaches:

In the first place the situations described and analyzed reflect in many ways, a disregard of human dignity, and disrespect its sacred and inalienable meaning, of its relational character and its harmony with creation, as Christ revealed it to us. There is no doubt that this principle is absent, or insufficiently present, in the criteria that currently rules economic development at all levels; it is absent from political decisions, from those that promote scientific and technological progress, as well as from social relations thus generating a crisis of humanity in its very foundations, which also has cultural consequences. Loss of a sense of human dignity has increased situations of violation or insufficient guarantee of human rights, has expanded indifference or tolerance of serious social inequalities, has diminished the possibilities of generating decent jobs, produces widespread impoverishment, and triggers the dynamics of exclusion, segregation and marginalization that many suffer. The increased violence also reveals the lack of a sense of human dignity: domestic violence, gender violence, violence against children, violence in coexistence and, of course, the structural violence identified in the diagnosis.

In second place, we are challenged and questioned by an absence of the horizon of the common good, this is, of a social principle of the common wealth shared by many¹² that must guide discernments, decisions and actions in the different areas of social life putting them at the service of all with equity. On the contrary, we see disarticulation in addressing problems and generating actions; the primacy of particular interests, incomplete visions of development, despite having the Sustainable Development Goals as a guiding principle. Problems continue reaching all areas and spaces of social life and are worsened by the presence of corruption. The persistence of economic and social inequality, as well as the increase in poverty and extreme poverty, are indicators that reveal the absence of a common good rationale and illustrate the concentration of goods in the hands of a few, while the vast majority barely have the means to satisfy their basic needs.

The insufficient health coverage and the limited access to quality education, now intensified by the gap in Internet connectivity made visible in this time of pandemic, are a sign that there is no criterion of common good in the decisions taken by governments when it comes to safeguarding fundamental rights. Without this criterion in the democratic culture, there is also no concern for the elderly, nor for the native peoples, nor for migrants and displaced people, nor for people with disabilities or special abilities, nor for peasants, nor for people with consumption problems. Neither is there room to worry about the environmental implications of the economic models and customs anchored in the population that affect the harmony between human beings and in their coexistence with the common home.

In the third place, questions arise: Why have we come to this point? What could have happened to bring us to this critical situation of humanitarian and social crisis? What significance has been given to all human activity? What is behind these

¹² Cf. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, “The Principle of the Common Good,” in *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2004) Nos. 164-170.

figures and analyses? What destiny are we approaching if we continue the same, if nothing changes? What are the horizons and ideals that have more weight when it comes to making decisions and carrying out actions in social life?

Questions also arise towards the Church, towards us as a missionary discipleship community about the way in which we have carried out our evangelizing mission: what did we do or what did we not do so that these crisis situations could arise? What is our share of responsibility, as the social subject that we are, in these circumstances described above? We must ask ourselves these questions at the personal level and at the level of parishes, congregations of consecrated life, movements and associations of the lay faithful, particular churches and also at level of the continental Church.

But, above all, rather than focusing our attention on the past, this moment of crisis and the questions posed by the previously presented diagnosis, lead us to think about the future. In the attitude how we want to face this crisis. Pope Francis says: “In the trials of life, you reveal your own heart: how solid it is, how merciful, how big or small. But when you’re in a crisis, it’s the opposite. You have to choose. And in making your choice you reveal your heart. Think of what happens in history. When people’s hearts are tested they become aware of what has held them down. They also feel the presence of the Lord, who is faithful, and responds to the cry of His people. The encounter that follows allows a new future to open up”¹³.

These words are an invitation to embrace the cross, confident that what will come out of this crisis is new life, so, rather than drawing back, we must go out to serve others and doing so, we will enable the change which will come only from compassion and service¹⁴.

¹³ Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream Together. A path to a better future*, Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial, Bogotá, 2020, p. 1

¹⁴ Cf. *Ibid*, p. 2.

Precisely those aspects we see permeating all the expressions of the crisis, are the ones in which the Church makes her greatest contribution to the world. The sense of the dignity of each person, the sense of the human community and the common good, and the sense of human activity in its legitimate autonomy, are the key areas of dialogue, of greater encounter and mutual enrichment, between the Church and the world. This was recognized by the bishops at the Council¹⁵.

The Council says: "Pursuing the saving purpose which is proper to her, the Church does not only communicate divine life to men but in some way casts the reflected light of that life over the entire earth, most of all by its healing and elevating impact on the dignity of the person, by the way in which it strengthens the seams of human society and imbues the everyday activity of men with a deeper meaning and importance. Thus through her individual members and her whole community, the Church believes she can contribute greatly toward making the family of man and its history more human"¹⁶.

Therefore, this critical situation, rather than turning us away, confirms us in the importance of the mission we are called to carry out in the midst of it.

Pope Francis also says: "Hearts have been tested. The crisis has called forth in some a new courage and compassion. Some have been sifted and have responded with the desire to reimagine our world; others have come to the aid of those in need in concrete ways that can transform our neighbor's suffering. That fills me with hope that we might come out of this crisis better. But we have to see clearly, choose well, and act right"¹⁷.

¹⁵ *Gaudium et Spes*, 40

¹⁶ *Ibid*

¹⁷ *Pope Francis, Soñemos juntos, o.c., p. 8.*

Horizons and keys for action

There are many action fronts requiring joint work within the Church in a spirit of synodality, as well as interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary dialogue with the world. It is also required targeted action on different levels of social life: the personal level, the family and community level, the social level, and the structural level.

In this diversity of spaces and levels of action it is of paramount importance to uphold common horizons and to general criteria that enable us to sustain unity. We could assume these horizons as follows.

Called to promote universal brotherhood and social friendship in our common home

Human beings, created by God-Love, find their fullness in the sincere gift of self to others expressing love in various creative ways. God's desire is to build one single family governed by a fraternal spirit, one that respects the equal dignity of every human being living in the common home.

The pandemic has shown that this dream of God has been shattered into pieces (FT 10-14), as demonstrated by the data on the complex socio-environmental crisis we are facing. Each human being is now more alone than ever in an overcrowded world that makes prevail individual interests and weakens the communitarian dimension of existence (FT 12). Disasters in ecosystems, the effects on human health and the impacts on the economy and finances are all the edges of the same crisis. It is therefore necessary to move from a culture of discarding to a culture of care. A systemic change is required. Everything is intertwined.

The Church, as a Good Samaritan, has the great task of showing with her testimony of merciful love and with an influential leadership at national and international level her primary option for the care of human life in all its expressions, especially the life of the poorest.

The words of GS 27 are very timely: "In our time, we have an urgent obligation to reach out to everyone and to serve them effectively when the need arises, whether it is a question of that old man abandoned by all, or that foreign worker unjustly despised, or that exile, or that illegitimate child who must endure sin without reason...that he did not commit, or of that hungry man who reproaches our conscience by recalling the word of the Lord: "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40).

Francis invites us to welcome and to value all people beyond regional borders, without exclusion of race, religion, abilities, sex, and to defend their fundamental rights to health, housing, work, education and food among others. "Every human being has the right to live with dignity and to develop integrally; this fundamental right cannot be denied by any country" (FT 107). All this urges us to continue defending human dignity in all its diversity, seeking the common good; these are principles developed by the Catholic Social Teaching (CST): "We are not simply talking about ensuring nourishment or a "dignified sustenance" for all people, but also their "general temporal welfare and prosperity". This means education, access to health care, and above all employment, for it is through free, creative, participatory and mutually supportive labour that human beings express and enhance the dignity of their lives. A just wage enables them to have adequate access to all the other goods which are destined for our common use" (EG 192).

Christians are invited to seek inclusive economic and social models in a globalized world respecting the regional originality and cultural differences. "Our faith in Christ, who became poor, and was always close to the poor and the outcast, is the basis of our concern for the integral development of society's most neglected members" (EG 186).

Our efforts must include the peripheries, with their diverse faces. And we must respond through networking; together with other social organizations all united by a common goal, strengthening each other for the educational task and for the fight against the structural causes of poverty and inequality. This must be a constant task as "only when our economic and social system no longer produces even a single victim, a single person cast aside, will we be able to celebrate the feast of universal fraternity" (FT 110).

Indicators describing the socioeconomic and environmental situation in Latin America and the Caribbean should be interpreted as keys of a culture of premature death. At the same time, they urge us to assume the challenge of creating a culture of life. The "Economy of Francesco" movement with its twelve villages and the "Global Compact on Education" respond to the practice of samaritanity, which is the evangelical reaction to the cries of Sister Mother Earth and of the poor.

The seven "Laudato si' Goals" (LSG) foreseen in the "Laudato si' Action Platform" connect ecclesial initiatives with the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It is established that integral ecology includes the response to these cries, but also the promotion of a new lifestyle, an ecological economy, an ecological education that connects with an ecological spirituality and a citizen political advocacy seeking the common good. Seven LSG's that, synergistically, can boost the Jubilee in our beloved common home by implementing them over the next seven years.

We are challenged by a "just recovery" from the urgent management of the "climate emergency" and the consideration of factors involved in the ecclesial polyhedron. The working group established by the Vatican to face the pandemic and push humanity towards a post-pandemic scenario in which "Fratelli Tutti" will sing "Laudato Si'" in all the "beloved" Amazonia of the planet, serves as an inspiration for us to make the word dawn.

Called to promote the Culture of Encounter amidst conflict

In our societies (pp. 101-104) there are many disagreements creating conflicts. It is well known that throughout history “conflicts of interest inevitably arise between different social groups and that in the face of these conflicts, Christians often have to speak out coherently and decisively”.

Faced with the challenge of developing a true democratic culture (p. 100), we have a Church that has collaborated in shaping the cultural mosaic of our Latin American and Caribbean peoples. In this historical moment we can contribute by designing designing “a culture which privileges dialogue as a form of encounter, it is time to devise a means for building consensus and agreement while seeking the goal of a just, responsive and inclusive society” (cfr. EG 239).

Francis invites us to build the “culture of encounter”, an art whose subject and protagonist is the people who enthusiastically transmit their lifestyle. A culture capable of building bridges, including everyone (cfr. FT 216). By people we mean a common identity made up of social and cultural ties (cfr. FT 157). All based on the principle of recognizing the other as different, exercising a friendly and supportive treatment and going out to meet them in the different situations of life.

The search for truth dignifies and unites us with a society wounded by lies that corrupt and divide. One proposal is to start from what unites us as a diverse, multicultural society, in this case the desire to overcome the pandemic and the unresolved structural problems in our countries by favoring collective well-being. We have a moral reserve that holds values of authentic Christian faith and humanism found in the substratum of Christian faith manifested in popular religiosity.

“An evangelized popular culture contains values of faith and solidarity capable of encouraging the development of a more just and believing society, and possesses a particular wisdom which ought to be gratefully acknowledged” (EG 68). Solidarity that we are seeing during this pandemic and that is expressed in thousands of initiatives of support for the most vulnerable people:

The pandemic gives us an opportunity to express our fraternal essence; we are all in the same boat and “no one is saved alone; we can only be saved together” (FT 32). Love of neighbor impels us to act in the face of emergencies.

We must take on humanitarian aid with co-responsibility in order to generate new transformative processes, taking an active part in the rehabilitation and relief of wounded societies. “We should not expect everything from those who govern us” (cf. FT 77). It is up to us to nourish what is good and put it at the service of the common good. When we take charge of what is ours, assuming the pain or the helplessness, we discover all the good that God has sown in the human heart.

The construction of the culture of encounter requires overcoming dialectics with a lifestyle that seeks the common good and social peace without losing the identity of each one, as Francis explains in EG 217-237. This same proposal is summarized in FT 215 saying: “The image of a polyhedron can represent a society where differences coexist, complementing, enriching and reciprocally illuminating one another, even amid disagreements and reservations. Each of us can learn something from others. No one is useless and no one is expendable. This also means finding ways to include those on the peripheries of life. For they have another way of looking at things; they see aspects of reality that are invisible to the centres of power where weighty decisions are made”.

The search for solutions to problems is an opportunity to join forces in a common objective, integrating diverse points of view. This practice implies flexibility and not rigidity, open-mindedness and open-heartedness, knowing that there are different paths that lead to the same goal.

Called to be artisans of peace by promoting joint actions

Since Vatican II, the emphasis has been on building peace (GS 83), without forgetting that “inequality and lack of integral human development make peace impossible” (FT 235). This challenges us to defend policies that contribute to equal opportunities, especially for the poorest, so that new social conflicts do not arise.

Jesus, who is peace in person (cf. Eph 2:14), calls all the baptized to be instruments of peace and credible witnesses to reconciliation. For this reason we count on the living witness of our ecclesial communities that practice forgiveness and reconciliation, showing that non-violence is possible in the face of a society divided and polarized by conflict (cf. EG 99-100). This type of witness attracts, convinces and shows that unity is superior to conflict. In this way, spaces of social friendship are created where new interpersonal relationships are recreated.

Francis invites us to be “peacemakers, men and women prepared to work boldly and creatively to initiate processes of healing and renewed encounter” (FT 225).

The art of building peace and promoting justice is a constant commitment in time that the Church, working together with various institutions, cannot forget, as well as the defense of the poorest (cfr. CA 58). It consists in collaborating in the whole process that requires requires “a patient effort to seek truth and justice, to honour the memory of victims and to open the way, step by step, to a shared hope stronger than the desire for vengeance” (FT 226). With our dedicated life, we proclaim “the gospel of peace” (Eph 6:15), ready to collaborate with national and international authorities to care for this great universal good. In particular, we collaborate in the protection and care of the victims of gender violence by creating mechanisms of denunciation and prevention for the various types of abuses, especially those experienced by poor women (pp. 120 and 121).

The common good is a dynamic construction, since achieving consensus while respecting the truth of human dignity is a path based on the practice of dialogue. Francis gives some guidelines for dialogue and social friendship in FT 198: “Approaching, speaking, listening, looking at, coming to know and understand one another, and to find common ground: all these things are summed up in the one word “dialogue”.

If we want to encounter and help one another, we have to dialogue”. Respect and willingness to listen to the other’s point of view is the fundamental basis¹⁸. The basis of this process is fraternal love that transcends borders and seeks to integrate, without discarding.

This exercise requires a practice from the inside out, from the personal to the community, from the family to society, from the national to the international. It commits us as Church to be educators of peace, collaborating in the formation of responsible, dialoguing and supportive citizens in the different stages of life.

Called to promote a politics of fraternity, responsible, solidary, and friend of the poor.

We know that in her dialogue with State and society, the Church does not have answers for all the particular questions¹⁹; but she can indeed propose fundamental values of human life and also convictions translatable into political action (cf. FT 241).

¹⁸ In CTI.S 4.3. *Listening and dialogue for community discernment, we find some guidelines that we can put into practice.*

¹⁹ *The diagnosis details data on the weakness of democracy, human rights, organized crime and corruption (pp.101 to 115).*

As for the “decline of representative democracy and the worn-out economic model that produces inequalities” (p. 104), we find several alternatives:

1. Restore the significance of the word popular-people, devalored and worn out because of misuse. In this way the value and meaning of democracy as “government by the people” will be completely understood.
2. The Church, respectful of democratic order’s autonomy, can contribute to strengthen the Rule of Law in those spaces where the three public powers – Executive, Legislative, and Judicial - maintain independent and balanced. In this way she guarantees the defense of inalienable citizens’ rights.
3. Continue denouncing human rights violations in countries that have moved away from the democratic model.
4. Contribute to the reform of state institutions, overcoming corruption and inefficiencies.
5. Promote a “healthy policy” with broad visions and a comprehensive reframing, incorporating the various aspects of the crisis caused by the pandemic in an interdisciplinary dialogue (FT 177).
6. Politics is a service vocation, a lay diakonia that promotes social friendship in view of the common good. It’s needed to prepare lay people on the basis of the Catholic Social Teaching. Recover fraternal love, specially the politic tenderness expressed in visible actions, close to people, supportive, giving priority to the poor. “Tenderness is the path of choice for the strongest most courageous men and women” (FT 194).
7. Promote laws that defend life in all its expressions, from conception to the dignified death of individuals.
8. Promote anti-drug and drug trafficking laws that affect the most vulnerable populations.
9. Promote family-focused social policies to help them by through allocation of means for their children’s education and the care of their elderly and so preventing them to get away from their nuclear family and consolidate intergenerational relations.
10. Support wage laws that protect labor without discrimination for sex, race, or religion, defending people’s rights and dignity.

11. Commit to the defense of the dignity and rights of women, keeping in mind that “doubly poor are those women who endure situations of exclusion, mistreatment and violence, since they are frequently less able to defend their rights” (FT 23).

In the face of the economic disasters produced by the pandemic, Francis affirms that it is opportune to think creatively about an economy integrated into a political, social, cultural and popular project that seeks the common good in order to open the way to different opportunities (FT 178).

The notion of recovery cannot be satisfied with a return to an unequal and unsustainable model of economic and social life, in which a tiny minority of the world’s population owns half of the world’s wealth²⁰. It insists on an economy of solidarity that takes into account the poorest, by reducing the external debt.

Called to promote a new educational pact for a solidary humanism

All crises give us the opportunity to grow and to draw benefits for the construction of a more humane, supportive, inclusive world, respectful of our common home.

This will only be possible if we make a new global and local educational pact to make everyone learn to embrace a solidary humanism, understanding and living the human condition in universal brotherhood, compassion and active solidarity.

²⁰ Francis, Letter of Pope Francis to Participants in the 2021 Spring Meetings of the World Bank Group and the International Monetary Fund, April 5-11, 2021, available at http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/es/letters/2021/documents/papa-francesco_20210404_let-tera-banca-mondiale.html?fbclid=IwAR1jYvV7sQXf8otNDkzE0W7N-GCmc1oYkZdnYHMBq-VviWjncsKZ6Yiy5UI

This is an education that teaches to appreciate Life, because LIFE is stronger than all threats of death, a gift that also makes us aware of our transitory nature. We need an education that helps us to be more humane, sensitive, able to accept our vulnerability; needed of the care of others and willing to care for others with a sense of responsibility. "If I take care of myself, I take care of others". The needed education promotes a collective awareness of care.

This is also a time to renew our faith, to open ourselves and seek deep answers: Where is God in this pandemic? What is the meaning of life? What is the meaning of eternal life? What is the communion of saints?

Confinement has given us the opportunity to be in solitude, to look inside ourselves and change both our attitudes and our relationships moving us from being "outside of" to being "inside" ourselves.

We also have chance to exercise patience, which is the first characteristic of love according to Paul (1Cor. 13:4) being the second characteristic service. Those who love are patient, helpful, and endure their own situations or those of others, without resignation, to find a solution that often does not depend only on one's own actions.

Confinement pushed us to understand that material things are worthless if we do not have health, so we put in the right place the value of things, people, nature, animals, and life in all its expressions. We can lose everything, but if we have life we can start again; paths of hope open before us.

We can now appreciate family much more, and understand home as a domestic church where we live together, celebrate, work, live daily life and transmit the faith. Dialogue in our families have been possible and respecting one another we can find spaces to live the culture of encounter, Distance has made us value and long for physical contact, embrace, closeness, face-to-face sharing, touching, eating together and celebrating. Virtual encounters allow us to communicate with each other, but cannot replace the other in his or her bodily, physical presence.

We as well bear the fruits of "fasting" of the Eucharist in those places where only on line masses were celebrated like realizing the spiritual communion that takes place when we find the Lord in his Word (SC 6). It is like the body of the Lord nourishing us and giving us life. This brings us closer to communities without priests that are held together by lay people who live their faith in a grown-up way.

The experience of love as to giving up one's life has re-emerged globally in the many testimonies of doctors and health personnel, as well as priests and religious who have given their lives by caring for the sick.

The "fasting from physical contact" has resulted in many creative ways to meet virtually. People, especially the elderly, developed skills to use the Internet to communicate and share with their community. We see a multitude of online initiatives to celebrate the faith: vigils, masses, rosaries, pilgrimages, among others

Virtuality has united us, breaking down borders and territorial limits. People are joining international virtual communities that meet to think, talk and grow in faith. This is a demonstration of the baptized's responsibility as active subjects in the construction of the Church.

The pandemic resurrects the hope that we can be infected with a deep love for each and every person, with whom we are one family living in the one common home for whose care and protection we are all responsible.

Let us take advantage of the fact that: "In today's globalized world, "the media can help us to feel closer to one another, creating a sense of the unity of the human family which in turn can inspire solidarity and serious efforts to ensure a more dignified life for all... The internet, in particular, offers immense possibilities for encounter and solidarity. This is something truly good, a gift from God" (FT 205).



For further dialogue

In our effort of recognizing the Risen One's presence in the midst of this crisis, Pope Francis' words and deeds have had, as we have already said, a prophetic character, opening new horizons and pulling us forward with hope

Not as much as for closing this theological-pastoral exercise, but instead to go on with further dialogue it is worth mentioning a few more words of Pope Francis

"And now what must I do? What could be my place in this future, and what can I do to make it possible? Two words come to mind: "decenter" and "transcend" (...) I prefer the contrasting image of the pilgrim, who is one who decenters and so can transcend. She goes out from herself, opens herself to a new horizon, and when she comes home she is no longer the same, and so her home won't be the same. This is a time of pilgrimages"²¹.

²¹ *Pope Francis, Let Us Dream Together, o. c., p. 141.*

Upon the current diagnosis of the socio-economic and environmental situation in Latin America and the Caribbean, the need to re-read this reality from a theological and pastoral perspective arises. This is a reassessment from the standpoint of our faith in the Lord who raises us and gives us new life amidst the complexity of this reality, impelling our history towards the fullness of His Kingdom: "Know that I am with you always until the end of time" (Mt 28:20).

The purpose of this missionary disciples look at our reality is to recognize, through the lens of our faith, the signs of the Lord's merciful presence, the plans He has for us, and His invitation to follow and serve Him. It is a matter of recognizing his salvation work in and through history, as every era has demanded the believers' community to do so.



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