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Book Review:
Let Us Dream: The Path To A Better Future

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Let Us Dream: The Path To A Better Future. Pope Francis. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2020. 149 pp., \$26.00, ISBN 978-1-9821-7186-5

Pope John Paul II (1920-2005) caused a publishing sensation with his best-selling *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (Alfred Knopf, 1994). It was the first full-length book ever written by a pope. John Paul II's successors have taken up his example and written several books for secular publishing houses. Pope Francis has more than a dozen titles in print, all of which are products of interviews and are aided by ghost writers. Francis' latest is *Let Us Dream* with Austen Ivereigh, a British journalist and a biographer of Francis.

Let Us Dream contains many of Francis' favorite ideas: Christians must go to the periphery; throwaway culture is harmful to the planet and to souls; migrants deserve "land, lodging and labor." The pope's points are illustrated with intriguing reflections on Biblical characters, including Jonah, Noah and Solomon. He frequently uses his conversations with ordinary workers and children to provide context and he draws upon his favorite authors like Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881), Fr. Romano Guardini (1885-1968) and Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). Francis, refreshingly for a pope, is comfortable with homey expressions. For example, he quotes "gauchos in Argentina and cowboys in the United States [who advise] 'Don't change horses in midstream.'" He says "true religion is not a freezer" and that Christians must use "the same words and sounds a grandmother uses to sing lullabies to her grandchildren." Several paragraphs in *Let Us Dream* refer to the United States. Francis twice mentions the killing of George Floyd; he expresses concern about gun violence; he recalls his 2015 talk to the U.S. Congress; and he praises Faith in Action (formerly PICO), a California based community organization network.

Covid-19 is the unifying thread for *Let Us Dream*. Francis lifts up "the nurses, doctors and caregivers...who sought all means to save the lives of others while giving their own." Those who died assisting Covid patients, he calls martyrs. He also draws attention to essential workers, including those in the informal economy. They are "an *invisible army* on the front lines of this pandemic," Francis writes. This is "an army with only the weapons of solidarity, hope and a sense of community." Francis notes that women are in leading roles during this crisis. In his opinion "the countries with women as presidents or prime ministers have on the whole reacted better and more quickly than others."

The book accelerates as Francis moves from Covid itself onto "what Covid has uncovered.... There are a thousand other crises that are just as dire." He names the plagues of homelessness, displacement of refugees and lack of respect for the gift of the unborn, the elderly and our planet. "The economic, the social and the ecological challenges we face are really different faces of the same crisis," he says.

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These other problems spread because of “the virus of indifference, which is the result of constantly looking away, telling ourselves that because there is no immediate or magic solution, it is better not to feel anything.” Francis uses an Italian word, *menefreghismo*, that can be translated *I don’t give a damn* or *who cares?* or *whatever*.

Similarly, “Covid has unmasked an existential myopia,” such that “the people most invested in the current way of doing things” think that recovery simply means “putting a bit of varnish on the future,” but returning to the same arrangements that perpetuate our disregard.

A virus can plague us metaphorically. “I’ve experienced three *Covids* in my own life,” Francis reveals. The first was during his second year of major seminary when an illness resulted in the removal of part of his lung. During those months, Francis learned to trust in medicine and to count on the common sense of nurses, in particular. Plus, he learned to avoid well-meaning but cheap consolations. The second Covid was his time in Germany where he tried to write a thesis. He felt lonely and out of place but learned to appreciate his roots. His third Covid was his dismissal to a retreat in central Argentina because he was too harsh and judgmental in his positions of provincial and rector. During this exile Francis was tempted by “polite demons”: “They ring the bell, they are courteous... But they take over the house... It’s the temptation of the devil in the guise of an angel.”

Covid is not defeated if our complacency and isolation triumph over the injustices in our world. “The beleaguered self—anxious, controlling, quick to take offense, self-justifying” cannot remain, says Francis. A society where “opponents seek *to cancel* each other in a game of power...[tragically] reflects a fragility of selfhood, a loss of roots.”

No, the metaphorical viruses await the vaccines of faith in God and solidarity with one another. “The pandemic has reminded us that no one is saved alone,” Francis says repeatedly. “God attracts us within a complex web of relationships and sends us out into the middle of the crossroads of history.”

Let Us Dream is encouraging and quite accessible to a general reader. It suggests that the term *social distancing* was unfortunate. A term like *physical distancing* is better. “Social distancing is a necessary response to a pandemic,” Francis concedes, “But it cannot last without eroding our humanity.” We were born for contact; we need touch, he concludes.

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