

# BUILDING PASTORAL CAPACITY IN THE POST-PANDEMIC ERA ALONGSIDE OF “HUMAN FRATERNITY”

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## ABSTRACT

A great number of people have expressed their admiration for the document on “Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together” (HF). One of the comments that is commonly heard is, “We will use this document as a guide to build and strengthen good and vibrant interfaith and intercultural relations.” This desire for better relations is validated by a statement in the paper itself: “It is a document that invites all persons who have faith in God and faith in human fraternity to unite and work together so that it may serve as a guide for future generations to advance a culture of mutual respect in the awareness of the great divine grace that makes all human beings brothers and sisters” (HF, 4). This statement draws us to ask about how the desire for better relations can be explicated in careful pastoral planning and steps. This paper will respond to such a question.

A few weeks after COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, on the Feast of Divine Mercy, the Pope astonished both Christians and non-Christians alike by saying, “To everyone: let us not think only of our interests, our vested interests. Let us welcome this time of trial as an opportunity to prepare for our collective future, a future for all without discarding anyone.”<sup>1</sup>

The Pope has earnestly conveyed his pastoral and moral calls to face the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the midst of helplessness, he has also invited all to think and imagine about the future. The Pope’s collection of writings, sermons, and letters, *Life after the Pandemic*, provides comprehensive pastoral directions substantiated by putting them in social context. From here, he steps in and proffers a vision of the new future of the human community.

What future, as asserted in the Pope’s messages, does the Church aspire to? Not the future for the few or for the handpicked nations only. Not the future for those who have large capital and have been socio-economically prepared for facing crises in the post-pandemic era. Rather, it is a future for all. Even the Pope has stressed that no one should be left behind in facing the future. Because without an all-embracing vision, there will be no future for anyone.<sup>2</sup>

With a worldwide perspective and throughout his 2020 Encyclical Letter, *Fratelli Tutti* (FT), “On Fraternity and Social Friendship,” he criticizes the failures of global cooperation in response to the pandemic. “In his simple and direct way, Saint Francis expressed the essence of a fraternal openness that allows us to acknowledge, appreciate and love each person, regardless of physical proximity, regardless of where he or she was born or lives” (FT, 1).<sup>3</sup>

## Human Fraternity: More Relevant and Urgent

The aforementioned pastoral appeal from the Pope, *Life After the Pandemic*, seems to be a retelling, and has a corresponding concern with the

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1. Pope Francis, “Egoism: An Even Worse Virus,” extract from the homily on the second Sunday of Easter (or the Feast of Divine Mercy), 19 April 2020, in *Life After the Pandemic*, preface by Card. Michael Czerny, S.J. (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020), 53.
  2. Pope Francis, “Egoism,” 53.
  3. Given in Assisi, at the tomb of Saint Francis, on 3 October 2020, Vigil of the Feast of the Saint, in the seventh year of his Pontificate.

document written a year earlier, “Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together” (HF).<sup>4</sup>

People have been impressed by that “Abu Dhabi” document which was co-signed by the His Holiness Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmad Al-Tayyib. When these two distinguished persons met and conversed in a friendly manner in one forum, they had already attracted people’s attention. Even more, these two prominent figures met in a historical setting and place.<sup>5</sup>

HF primarily plays a role as a basis for interreligious and intercultural dialogue. However, this document also addresses the challenges of human life. While in HF the Pope puts the emphasis on brotherhood, in *Life After the Pandemic*, the Pope employs and makes use of the phrase “our collective future.”<sup>6</sup> These two documents are so similar in nature and spirit.

In HF, as early as the second paragraph, the Pope and the Grand Imam write that care for brotherhood cannot be separated or isolated from efforts to protect creation and preferences for the poor and marginalized. “Through faith in God, who has created the universe, creatures and all human beings (equal on account of his mercy), believers are called to express this human fraternity by safeguarding creation and the entire universe and supporting all persons, especially the poorest and those most in need” (HF, 2). The current pandemic has changed the ecosystem of human life that touches the relationship among mankind, nature, and God.

This abovementioned paragraph is reaffirmed in paragraphs 6 to 16, which comprise of a litany of “in the name of.” These 11 paragraphs, though written in early 2019 and for different intentions, now resonate with the situation currently faced by mankind, where humanity is struggling to conquer a pandemic. “In the name of God who has created all human beings ... who has called them to live together as brothers and sisters” (HF, 6); “whoever saves

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4. Document on “Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together,” signed by His Holiness Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmad al-Tayyib, Abu Dhabi, 4 February 2019. This document is frequently quoted in FT.

5. The United Arab Emirates borders Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam. This country contrasts with its larger neighbor, which outlaws all non-Muslim places of worship. It tolerates Christians among its large migrant workforce to practice their faith. Francis wrapped up his historic three-day visit with the Mass. Pope Francis held a historic public Mass for an estimated 170,000 Catholics, at the end of the first papal visit to the Arabian Peninsula, where Islam was born.

6. Pope Francis, “Egoism,” 53.

a person is like one who saves the whole of humanity” (HF, 7); “those most in need whom God has commanded us to help as a duty required of all persons” (HF, 8); “those who live in fear, prisoners of war and those tortured in any part of the world, without distinction...” (HF, 9).

## Pastoral and Practical Documents

Those who take HF more seriously will naturally want to know further and deeper into the contents of the document. Many comments have been made. A great number of people have expressed their admiration and positive response for the contents of this consoling and enlightening appeal. One of the comments that is commonly heard is, “We will use this document as a guide to build and strengthen good and vibrant interfaith and intercultural relations.”

Such a sentiment draws us to wonder how the desire for better relations can be explicated in careful pastoral planning and steps. This sentiment is further validated by one statement stated in the paper itself: “It is a document that invites all persons who have faith in God and faith in human fraternity to unite and work together so that it may serve as a guide for future generations to advance a culture of mutual respect in the awareness of the great divine grace that makes all human beings brothers and sisters” (HF, 4).

Returning to *Life After the Pandemic*, the tone of whatever exclamation, sermon, or letter delivered by the Pope, a shepherd himself, is very characteristically pastoral. By way of this writing, he has conveyed hope, which is not empty because he has also showed guidance for how the human being can face a severe crisis such as COVID-19. These eight significant spoken and written texts dated from 27 March to 22 April show Pope Francis’s warm and inclusive approach.

Cardinal Michael Czerny, S.J., in his preface, writes, “This collection has two objectives. The first is to suggest direction, keys, and guidelines for rebuilding a better world that might be born from this crisis of humanity. The second objective is, in the midst of so much suffering and bewilderment, to sow hope. The Pope clearly bases this hope on faith, ‘because with God life never dies.’”<sup>7</sup>

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7. Card. Michael Czerny, S.J., preface to *Life After the Pandemic*, 3.

This paper will share some interpretations and ideas on how to make practical and effective use of the HF document as a long-term guide in building and sustaining a harmonious life in general and in building and sustaining the Christian-Muslim relationship in particular. It will become a pastoral guide to anticipate the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The prospect of “We will use this document as a guide to build and strengthen good and vibrant interfaith and intercultural relations” requires several questions that must be addressed properly:

1. *Where has the world been and is?*
2. *Where could the world be going – possibilities?*
3. *What are the desired transformations that we wish to happen?*
4. *Desired Understanding: What should they be able to understand?*
5. *Desired Competency: What should they be able to do?*
6. *Who will act on the transformation?*

## 1. Where Has the World Been and Is?

The Pope and the Grand Imam have signified a map of the world today which is marked and filled with moral challenges. There are social-political intricacies whose long-term damage potentially undermines humankind and creation.

We likewise affirm that major political crises, situations of injustice and lack of equitable distribution of natural resources – which only a rich minority benefit from, to the detriment of the majority of the peoples of the earth – have generated, and continue to generate, vast numbers of poor, infirm and deceased persons. This leads to catastrophic crises that various countries have fallen victim to despite their natural resources and the resourcefulness of young people which characterize these nations. (HF, 22)

Prior to the pandemic, the Pope and the Grand Imam had provided a description of the red and wretched map of the earth. With this pandemic, it has been no doubt that the global socio-political map is getting darker with a little light.

When the world was hit by a pandemic, the Pope gave a very concrete and real illustration. He showed those whom we saw and met every day, but probably we never noticed attentively. How are they struggling to survive in the time of the pandemic? “I would therefore like to acknowledge the world of street papers, and especially the vendors, for the most part homeless, terribly marginalized, unemployed: thousands of people across the world who live and have a job thanks to selling these extraordinary newspapers.”<sup>8</sup>

It is clear that the pastoral endeavors of the Pope involve real people in everyday life. So it is no surprise that the demographics he is most concerned with are women, children, the elderly, the weak and vulnerable, and helpless: “It is also necessary to protect women from sexual exploitation and from being treated as merchandise or objects of pleasure or financial gain” (HF, 37). “The protection of the fundamental rights of children to grow up in a family environment, to receive nutrition, education and support, are duties of the family and society” (HF, 38). “The protection of the rights of the elderly, the weak, the disabled, and the oppressed is a religious and social obligation” (HF, 39).

At this point, HF has become even a more urgent guide. In fact, it is under even more critical pressure. The war against a pandemic requires a human fraternity regardless of religious and cultural background and boundaries. The realization that all human beings must come together is a promise and a must for the future.

Despite the more limited mobility of the radical and hardliner groups, they certainly will never die. During the crisis of the pandemic, terrorism and intolerance have lived on and their proponents even view the global pandemic as an opportunity for expansion.<sup>9</sup> There is a possibility, employing the reasoning of HF, that when COVID-19 is relatively tamed and curtailed, terrorism will rise again with greater energy and aggression. Poverty and starvation are social illnesses that can easily be exploited to ignite radical movements.

Terrorism is deplorable and threatens the security of people, be they in the East or the West, the North or the South, and

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8. Pope Francis, “To the World of Street Newspapers,” in *Life after the Pandemic*, 55.

9. “Impact of Covid-19 for Peace: On Violent Extremism and Terrorism,” Division for Peace Advisory Board Offices and Training Centres, UNITAR, Geneva, Switzerland.

disseminates panic, terror and pessimism, but this is not due to religion, even when terrorists instrumentalize it. It is due, rather, to an accumulation of incorrect interpretations of religious texts and to policies linked to hunger, poverty, injustice, oppression and pride. (HF, 34)

The Pope and the Grand Imam believe that terrorism is not a teaching of faith or religion itself. Terrorism, in fact, is “a deviation from religious teachings.” They construe further, “They result from a political manipulation of religions and from interpretations made by religious groups who, in the course of history, have taken advantage of the power of religious sentiment in the hearts of men and women in order to make them act in a way that has nothing to do with the truth of religion” (HF, 26). In this peculiar time, extremism remains a human disturbance that is much more difficult to solve.

## 2. Where Could the World Be Going? Imagining Possibilities

In the midst of the fight against this pandemic, the Pope reminds us that there is probably be a virus worse than COVID-19. On the occasion of the Feast of Divine Mercy, he delivered a sermon, entitled “Egoism: An Even Worse Virus.” He picked up the lesson of Thomas, the disciple who arrived late; he was the only one missing. The Lord, however, emphasizes the Pope, waited for Thomas.<sup>10</sup> In the community of disciples, after the resurrection of Jesus, one was left behind and, however, since mercy does not abandon those who stay behind, the others waited for him.

The story about Thomas has delivered a critical message in this trying time, “a small part of the human family has moved ahead, while the majority has remained behind.”<sup>11</sup> In addition to this unfortunate reality, the Pope also expects the case will not automatically be as good as many people probably envision, when a vaccine can be found. Do not imagine that the world will simply get better after the vaccine.

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10. Pope Francis, “Egoism,” 51.

11. Ibid., 52–53.

On 19 August 2020, the Pope worried that the development of a vaccine would become the fortune of rich nations and would be not shared with everyone. The “virus of social justice,” he asserted, is as big a challenge as the medical response to COVID-19.<sup>12</sup> “These symptoms of inequality reveal a social illness; it is a virus that comes from a sick economy. And we must say it simply: the economy is sick. It has become ill. It is sick. It is the fruit of unequal economic growth – this is the illness.”<sup>13</sup>

We will face an even bigger and more terrifying challenge. The story of extremism and intolerance will continue in the future. The virus of social justice will continue to plague and encourage the proliferation of these diseases. “History shows that religious extremism, national extremism and also intolerance have produced in the world, be it in the East or West, what might be referred to as signs of a ‘third world war being fought piecemeal.’ In several parts of the world and in many tragic circumstances these signs have begun to be painfully apparent, as in those situations where the precise number of victims, widows and orphans is unknown” (HF, 21).

Further, a grim social structure is depicted in the document. “We see, in addition, other regions preparing to become theatres of new conflicts, with outbreaks of tension and a build-up of arms and ammunition, and all this in a global context overshadowed by uncertainty, disillusionment, fear of the future, and controlled by narrow-minded economic interests” (HF, 21).

With this pandemic, it must be noted, the global and local political structure will significantly change. Some countries, especially those with populist and authoritarian governments, have taken advantage of the powerlessness of many communities for their economic political interest. Superior General of the Society of Jesus, Arturo Sosa, S.J., in his message to the Major Superiors of Jesuit Conference of Asia Pacific (13 July 2020), says,

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12. Christopher Lamb, “The Pope’s Blueprint for a World After Covid-19,” *The Tablet*, 26 August 2020, <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/13297/the-pope-s-blueprint-for-a-world-after-covid-19?s=08>, accessed 5 September 2020.

13. Pope Francis, “General Audience Library of the Apostolic Palace,” Wednesday, 26 August 2020, [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2020/documents/papa-francesco\\_20200826\\_udienza-generale.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200826_udienza-generale.html), uploaded 28 August 2020, accessed 25 September 2020.



“The pandemic has revealed the structural injustice embedded in all dimensions of human life. What has become clear is the accumulated lack of care, the *des-cuido*, that has resulted in the socio-economic inequalities and environmental degradation that in this crisis have become much more pronounced. I am worried about democracy as a victim of the pandemic.”<sup>14</sup>

### 3. What Are the Desired Transformations That We Wish to Happen?

The Pope and the Grand Imam have envisioned the ideal picture of religions in the future. It is of religions characterized by a culture of peace and harmony. It is beyond our imagination to see that there are some people who are “using the name of God to justify acts of murder, exile, terrorism and oppression” (HF, 26).

We thus call upon all concerned to stop using religions to incite hatred, violence, extremism and blind fanaticism, and to refrain from using the name of God to justify acts of murder, exile, terrorism and oppression. (HF, 26)

In fact, since we expect that this trying time will bring mankind, especially the faithful, to lead to the movement toward a more spiritually mature society, we should do more. “In this time of uncertainty and anguish, I invite everyone to welcome the gift of hope that comes from Christ. It is He who helps us navigate the tumultuous waters of sickness, death and injustice, which do not have the last word over our final destination.”<sup>15</sup>

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14. He writes and describes his arguments by putting some cases and examples: “The development of the situation in Hong Kong is going in this direction of reducing the space for democracy, for citizens’ participation in public decisions. The constitutional change in Russia seems to convert the President into a new Czar. The reactions of Donald Trump to racism protest. Latin-American governments have taken advantage of the health crisis to increase control over impoverished populations (Venezuela, Brazil, Nicaragua, Cuba, Mexico...).” (Message of Father General Arturo Sosa, S.J., Jesuit Conference of Asia Pacific MSA, 13 July 2020.)

15. Pope Francis, “To Heal the World,” catechesis on the pandemic, 12 August 2020, <https://www.bryanstoncatholic.co.za/2020/10/01/catechesis-to-heal-the-world-04-by-pope-francis/>, accessed 5 October 2020.

We must think about the future generations of humanity and society who, we hope, would diminish individualistic attitudes and selfish, hostile characters, which all are the seeds of radicalism and blind extremism. “We affirm also the importance of awakening religious awareness and the need to revive this awareness in the hearts of new generations through sound education and an adherence to moral values and upright religious teachings” (HF, 24).

We cannot ignore the role of family in creating a better life. Education within the family as the basic core of society and humanity is so crucial. Well-built moral formation comes from familial education. “To attack the institution of the family, to regard it with contempt or to doubt its important role, is one of the most threatening evils of our era” (HF, 23).

Transformation of young people is another area that should never be neglected. Values education from the early formation is a condition for the establishment of a greater future civilization: “...and to reawaken religious awareness among young people so that future generations may be protected from the realm of materialistic thinking and from dangerous policies of unbridled greed and indifference that are based on the law of force and not on the force of law...” (HF, 28).

We must bear in mind that brotherhood-sisterhood should be mirrored in doable expressions that become the practice of day-to-day affairs. Two things that are very ordinary and yet very crucial in constituting interreligious and cross-cultural reality are the issue of religious freedom and the guarantee of houses of worship. These are even considered to be part of the religious identity itself: “... the fact that people are forced to adhere to a certain religion or culture must be rejected, as too the imposition of a cultural way of life that others do not accept...” (HF, 29).

The protection of places of worship – synagogues, churches and mosques – is a duty guaranteed by religions, human values, laws and international agreements. Every attempt to attack places of worship or threaten them by violent assaults, bombings or destruction, is a deviation from the teachings of religions as well as a clear violation of international law.... (HF, 33)

#### 4. Desired Understanding: What Should They Be Able to Understand?

Knowledge and understanding of the subject being discussed is very important. However, not all information is desirable and helpful for this purpose. Moreover, a process of how to gain insights is also noteworthy. HF puts the emphasis on the nature of dialogue. “Dialogue among believers means coming together in the vast space of spiritual, human and shared social values and, from here, transmitting the highest moral virtues that religions aim for. It also means avoiding unproductive discussions.” (HF, 32)

All religious people, specifically scholars, must ground the knowledge of religions in philosophical comprehension, the most foundational level. We should not be complacent at the surface level, which is the level of legalistic and doctrinal awareness. Rather, we must go in to find universal values of love, justice, and peace.

The firm conviction that authentic teachings of religions invite us to remain rooted in the values of peace; to defend the values of mutual understanding, human fraternity and harmonious coexistence; to re-establish wisdom, justice and love.... (HF, 28)

The appreciation of religious freedom is the basis for living together in peace. The inclusion of religious freedom as an inherently human right must be apprehended. Another concept that is very close to religious freedom is plurality. Plurality is the reality of the life of God’s creations. “Freedom is a right of every person: each individual enjoys the freedom of belief, thought, expression and action. The pluralism and the diversity of religions, colour, sex, race and language are willed by God in His wisdom, through which He created human beings. This divine wisdom is the source from which the right to freedom of belief and the freedom to be different derives” (HF, 29).

“Dialogue, understanding and the widespread promotion of a culture of tolerance, acceptance of others and of living together peacefully would contribute significantly to reducing many economic, social, political and environmental problems that weigh so heavily on a large part of humanity” (HF, 31). Very close to a peaceful life is a condition of justice. “Justice based

on mercy is the path to follow in order to achieve a dignified life to which every human being has a right” (HF, 30).

While we are exploring our response to “What should they be able to understand?” we should not forget about compassion, as Pope Francis reminds us.

Now, while we are looking forward to a slow and arduous recovery from the pandemic, there is a danger that we will forget those who are left behind. The risk is that we may then be struck by an even worse virus, that of *selfish indifference*. A virus spread by the thought that life is better if it is better for me, and that everything will be fine if it is fine for me. It begins there and ends up selecting one person over another, discarding the poor, and sacrificing those left behind on the altar of progress. The present pandemic, however, reminds us that there are no differences or borders between those who suffer. We are all frail, all equal, all precious.<sup>16</sup>

When we are attempting to gain “understanding” in the pastoral context in this arduous time, it is not solely comprehended as a mental process related to a situation. Understanding is not purely related to learning concepts; rather, it should contain or confer wisdom, especially religious wisdom.

## 5. Desired Competency: What Should They Be Able to Do?

The expected and crucial competency in the world shattered by the pandemic is an ability to build a human life in one unified community. The Pope illustrated that “... only together can we do this” by quoting Mark’s story (Ch. 4) when Jesus calms the storm:

Like the disciples in the Gospel we were caught off guard by an unexpected, turbulent storm. We have realized that we are on the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented, but at the same time important and needed, all of us called to row together, each of us in need of comforting the other. On this boat ... are all of us. Just like those disciples, who spoke anxiously with one voice, saying

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16. Pope Francis, “Egoism,” 51–52.

‘We are perishing’ (v. 38), so we too have realized that we cannot go on thinking of ourselves, but only together can we do this.”<sup>17</sup>

The very powerful phrase by the Pope, “...only together can we do this,” as ordinary as it is, has resonated in a strong way for us today. However, this communiqué or hope is not something that we can reach automatically. It must be made into a competency, a skill that is needed to achieve a goal.

## 6. Who Will Act on the Transformation?

In HF, the Pope and Grand Imam called the attention of the parties who are expected to have the ability and authority to implement the aspiration inscribed in HF. In the two paragraphs below, they specify to rely on persons on whom they count to disseminate this important message:

1. To this end, by mutual cooperation, the Catholic Church and Al-Azhar announce and pledge to convey this Document to authorities, influential leaders, persons of religion all over the world, appropriate regional and international organizations, organizations within civil society, religious institutions and leading thinkers. They further pledge to make known the principles contained in this Declaration at all regional and international levels, while requesting that these principles be translated into policies, decisions, legislative texts, courses of study and materials to be circulated. (HF, 4)
2. We call upon intellectuals, philosophers, religious figures, artists, media professionals and men and women of culture in every part of the world, to rediscover the values of peace, justice, goodness, beauty, human fraternity and coexistence in order to confirm the importance of these values as anchors of salvation for all, and to promote them everywhere. (HF, 18)

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17. Pope Francis, “Why Are You Afraid?” Urbi et Orbi Address during the Extraordinary Moment of Prayer, 27 March 2020, in *Life after the Pandemic*, 17.

The Pope called on a powerful group, namely, political leaders whose great power should be recognized. “I encourage political leaders to work actively for the common good.”<sup>18</sup> He also adds some elements of communities that are too small to be considered important by most people, but he presents them as essential. Isn’t it that revolutions also start with people who have been ignored? The Pope refers to the smallest community in society, namely, the family. “How difficult it is to stay at home for those who live in tiny, ramshackle dwellings, or for the homeless! How difficult it is for migrants, those who are deprived of freedom, and those in rehabilitation from an addiction.”<sup>19</sup> More specifically, he refers to the role of the mother in support of the whole family in crisis situations. We shouldn’t overlook this importance. “I think of all the people, especially women, who multiply loaves of bread in soup kitchens: two onions and a package of rice make up a delicious stew for hundreds of children....”<sup>20</sup>

## Concluding Remark

However good and advantageous our pastoral plan is, our efforts are still necessary. Our human efforts and St Paul’s three virtues (faith, hope, love; 1 Cor 13:13) are not two separate entities. They are unified. We couldn’t agree more with the Pope, in the context of COVID-19 pandemic, when he writes, “Anyone who thinks that the only lesson to be learned was the need to improve what we were already doing, or to refine existing systems and regulations, is denying reality” (FT, 7).

Despite of our vulnerability and brokenness, we are called to bear His Cross. The condition of lacking necessities and comforts call us to respond. This paper is a systematic attempt to answer that call.

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18. Pope Francis, “Like a New Flame,” *Urbi et Orbi* Address, Easter Sunday, 12 April 2020.

19. Pope Francis, “To an Invisible Army,” in *Life after the Pandemic*, 37.

20. *Ibid.*, 36.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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