

Wisdom from Carmel in a Time of Pandemic **by Fr. Daniel Chowning of the Good Shepherd, OCD**

We are living in a time of darkness. Drawing upon St. John of the Cross' metaphor of the "dark night of the soul," we can think of the coronavirus pandemic as a "global dark night," "a dark night of humanity." This is not the first pandemic humanity has endured. For instance, the bubonic plague (Black Plague) that originated in China and swept through Asia, Europe and Africa in the 14th century wiped out approximately 50 million people. Some cities in England were reduced to half the population. In 1918, following the Great War, the Spanish flu ravaged our country and wiped out close to 600,000 American lives.

The present pandemic is a darkness in the sense that we have no idea when it will end. It suddenly landed on us like a tsunami. We were not prepared for the deluge of infections, thousands of deaths, and the consequences on so many levels of life: economically, medically, socially, family life, education, and travel, and even religious worship. The pandemic has affected every dimension of our life. Even though we hope to see a vaccine distributed within a couple of months, we have no idea how long it will take for the vaccine to be distributed to the wider population. Even with the vaccine, there are questions. "Is it safe?" "How effective will it be?" "Will the poor have access to it?" "Who will receive the vaccine first?"

Not only do we struggle with the uncertainty of how long the pandemic will last, there is the darkness of death. So many of our loved ones have been infected or have died. Hundreds have died alone without the comforting presence of their loved ones and buried without a proper funeral. There is the darkness of not being able to celebrate the Eucharist as freely as we wish. Many churches were closed or limited the number who could attend Mass. Limitation of numbers who can attend the Eucharist continues in some parts of the United States and Europe. Confessions were curtailed for fear of contagion, and still are in many places. There is the darkness of staying indoors, self-isolation, wearing masks in public, lockdowns, curfews, portable morgues, supporting health-care workers on the front lines, many, too, who died as a consequence of their dedicated care for Covid victims.

We struggled with the darkness of not being able to gather as a family and friends for Thanksgiving. Who knows how we will celebrate Christmas? According to some medical specialists, like Dr. Fauci, the next few months may be very painful for our country.

The coronavirus pandemic is part of another reality of darkness and suffering. There is the darkness of climate change which is a major concern for our world: pollution (pollution, waste, and throwaway culture), the issue of water (the depletion of our natural resources and the issue of fresh drinking water), the loss of forests and woodlands which entails a loss of species; the extinction of mammals or birds, butterflies and bees, the melting of glaciers, rising of the seas, increased hurricanes and floods, and increasing temperatures. What have we done to our common earth, as Pope Francis asks in his Apostolic letter, *Laudato Si'*?

In our country, we are undergoing the darkness of political unrest and division. We have recently witnessed wide-scaled violence and racial turbulence. When will it end? How can we end the violence that has destroyed and continues to take innocent lives? How can we heal the racism so deeply rooted in our American history and culture? How can we bring unity and healing to a divided country where political differences create enemies? There is so much uncertainty, fear, and anxiety. What is the answer? From where can we find inspiration and hope as we face and cope with these forms of darkness?

Our Carmelite tradition offers us wisdom and direction in this dark night of humanity. St. John of the Cross is universally recognized for his doctrine on the “dark night of the soul.” What is the “dark night?” To begin with, we were created out of love and for love. Our roots are in God, a God who created us in God’s image and likeness, created us to share in Trinitarian Divine Life, a God who passionately loves us and has entered a love affair with humanity in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. *“In this interior union God communicates himself to the soul with such genuine love that neither the affection of a mother, with which she tenderly caresses her child, nor a brother’s love, nor any friendship is comparable to it.”* (SC. 27.1) We were made for Love, to love as God loves. *“Love is the end for which we were created.”* (SC 29.3) We possess a beauty and dignity beyond our understanding because God dwells in the depth of our being. God is never absent, regardless of our moral state or circumstances in life!

“Oh, then, soul most beautiful of among all creatures, so anxious to know the dwelling place of our Beloved so you may go in search of him and be united to him, now we are telling you that your yourself are his dwelling and his secret inner room and hiding place. It brings great happiness to a person to understand that God is never absent, not even from a soul in mortal sin, and how much less from one in the state of grace.” (SC, 1.7)

Love is our divine vocation. Yet we know from personal experience that all is not well with the human condition. Due to original sin, personal sin, our personal history shaped by our family background and unique personalities, psychic make-up, and emotional wounds, all is not well. There is a deep conflict and division in our hearts. As St. Paul tells us, *“What I do, I do not understand. For I do not do what I want, but I do what I hate.”* (Rom. 7:15-16) We are easily swept along by our selfish desires, attachments, and addictions. We judge by the appearance of things rather than their deeper reality. We experience an inner warfare despite our sincerest desires to love God and others as the Gospel calls us. We can imagine this as the “coronavirus” that lingers in our spiritual and natural atmosphere and threatens our complete health which consists in loving God with our whole heart, soul, and mind, and our neighbor as ourselves. Furthermore, as St. Paul reminds us, there is a force of evil at work in our universe. *“Put on the armor of God so that you may be able to stand firm against the tactics of the devil. For our struggle is not with flesh and blood but with the principalities, with the powers, with the rulers of this present darkness, with the evil spirits in the heavens.”* (Eph. 6:11-12)

Despite the darkness we experience, there is hope! For St. John of the Cross, the “dark night of sense and spirit” is an act of God’s mercy; it is a sign of hope.

*One dark night,
Fired with love's urgent longings
-ah, the sheer grace!*

The sheer merciful grace of God intervenes in our darkness, suffering and uncertainty and offers us healing and liberation. God never gives up on us! The sober truth is, we have a wound that only God can heal. We are incapable of freeing and healing ourselves from the disorder (sickness – the “coronavirus”) that lurks in our hearts and minds, and in our universe. Therefore, God must intervene in our lives to heal, purify and transform us at the deepest level of our being. The dark night is a metaphor, therefore, of a progressive healing and transformation of the human person at the deepest level of our being through the liberating power of the Holy Spirit who transforms us of what we ourselves cannot do by human effort. Through the purifying and healing action of the Holy Spirit we are slowly and progressively transformed into divine life, a life of loving union with God and others.

It is important to remember that the dark night of St. John of the Cross does not take place in a vacuum, rather, it is incarnated in daily life. The purifying hand of God touches our lives in and through ordinary experiences of life: trials, temptations, illnesses, humiliations, conflictual relationships, failures, and separations. God's saving grace can come to us in any painful or uncertain situation of life, even in a pandemic such as Covid 19! What makes the dark night curative and transformative is our attitude towards it, our openness to embrace the darkness in faith, hope, and love, our willingness to surrender to God and let God carry us.

In the *Living Flame of Love*, St. John of the Cross tells us when God begins this purifying work of love, the Holy Spirit begins by “wounding” us, that is, the Holy Spirit shines the light of his love into the darkest regions of our hearts and minds and brings to light all our infirmities, imperfections, miseries, and sinfulness – all those things that prevent us from receiving the fullness of God's love. (LF. 1, 19) *“All the soul's infirmities are brought to light; they are set before its eyes to be felt and healed.”* (LF. 1.21) This is an experience of searing and painful self-knowledge, an illuminative experience in which we become conscious of our frail and broken human nature. With the light of the Holy Spirit we have to face the inner disorder and war that wages within us and allow the Spirit of Love to heal us. We have to face our mortality and radical need for God's help!

Isn't this similar to our experience of the pandemic? One of the primary revelations of the pandemic is how little control we have over our lives and how utterly fragile we are. It discloses our mortality in very concrete, painful, unexpected, and even dreadful ways. We are not god; we have no control over our lives. Life is short and fragile. Our lives can be taken from us in a flash.

I live in Rome. I remember the first weeks of the pandemic when Italy was locked down for almost two months. Everything stopped. Italy, and especially Rome, depends on tourism for its economy. Thousands of tourists walk the streets of Rome every day, 365 days a year. One report indicated that the Vatican Museums lost about one million dollars a day due to the absence of

tourists from around the world! Restaurants, pizzerias, cafes, and shops closed. Even parks were locked. Grocery stores limited the number of people who entered at one time. Grocery store managers were vigilant on how many vegetables and meat one purchased so that there would be enough for others. An unusual mysterious silence hovered over Rome. There was no sound of airplanes flying through the sky. Very few cars circulated. Streets were almost empty, except for people whose essential purpose for leaving home was to walk to work. Even the city buses were almost empty. If we had to leave the monastery, we had to carry a certificate explaining our reasons for being on the street. The Italian borders were closed to outsiders. Even in Italy, some provinces were completely closed to other provinces. As an American, it was doubtful at one moment if I could leave Italy and return to the US. The US also closed its borders to several countries.

As I pondered this long period of confinement, the consequences, and the manifold reactions to it, including my own, I realized that the pandemic is exposing some of our deepest fears, insecurities, attachments, and addictions. The economic repercussions have been disastrous and extensive indeed. On the other hand, the pandemic unmasks our consumerism, our need to shop, to hoard, to collect, and to buy more than we need. One person told me that it was becoming difficult to purchase toilet paper, paper towels, and detergents where she normally shopped because some people, full of so much anxiety and greed, purchased all they could with no thought of other people.

The restrictions on travel at home and abroad, on visiting others in their homes, wearing masks, and self-isolation has been very difficult and discloses our desperate need for movement, connection, and relationships. Depression soared due to separation from loved ones and lack of social stimulation. The mother of a friend of mine who lived in an assisted living facility literally gave up and decided to die because she was separated from her family. Families have been restricted from visiting their parents or friends in nursing homes and retirement centers. This has been extremely painful for both the elderly and their family and friends. This woman, vibrant, alert, and very sociable, suddenly became so depressed over separation from her family that she literally gave up and died. Suicides, too, escalated. One young emergency room female physician was so traumatized by the overwhelming number of Covid victims dying alone, and in such desperate conditions, that she fell into a deep depression, returned to her family home in Virginia and ended her life.

The pandemic has unmasked our strong self-will and pride. One example was a news conference of people in Atlanta who rudely, even violently, opposed doctors, nurses, and city officials over the mandate to wear face masks in public. In a public meeting, they challenged the city officials, doctors and nurses: "Who are you to tell us that we have to wear a face mask? You should go back to medical school. You don't know what you are talking about. No one is going to tell us what to do!" They gave no consideration as to how they could infect their family members, friends, or vulnerable neighbors. This demonstrates the ferocious self-will and human pride who cares only for itself and not for the well-being of others.

When St. John of the Cross writes about the necessity of the dark night in our spiritual journey, he says that we walk more securely in darkness and advance more in the spiritual life by suffering than by joy and action. This is not an easy teaching to interpret. What does he mean? John tells us that we walk more securely by faith (trust in God) and grow in wisdom more by what we suffer in life than by joy and consolation. If we consider this carefully in light of our own experience, I'm sure we can agree with John. We learn more wisdom from our sufferings, mistakes, and the trials of life, than from a classroom, or books, or from what other people tell us. Suffering can be a great teacher if we are open to learn its lessons. It all depends upon our attitude as to what happens to us.

John of the Cross has a wonderful metaphor of how God heals us through darkness and suffering. Like a person who is ill and needs to be confined to her bedroom in order to rest, such is how God cures us. *"Since the soul, as it were, is undergoing a cure to regain its health, which is God himself, His Majesty restricts it to a diet, to abstinence in all things, and causes it to lose its appetite for them all. This effect resembles the cure of sick people when esteemed by members of their household: They are kept inside so that neither air nor light may harm them; others try not to disturb them by the noise of their footsteps or even whisperings, and give them very delicate and limited amount of food, substantial rather than tasty."* (2N. 16.10)

The metaphor of a sick person, confined to his or her quiet and dark bedroom, is an apt image of the confinement imposed by the pandemic. We have been confined to our homes. Restrictions on travel and family gatherings, unnecessary activity and socializing outside the home, self-isolation, social distancing, mask-wearing, working from home and virtual learning for children, are God's ways of confining us to a quiet place in order to heal us. What are the lessons?

To begin with, it is a call to be still. To come home to our center and to examine ourselves and ask some essential questions about our life. Why am I here? What is the purpose of my life? What is most important in my life? Is God the center of my life? What am I most grateful for? How are my relationships with my family, friends, and neighbors?

It is so easy to take life for granted. How easy it is for us to be overly critical and demanding in our relationships, but when our loved ones are in danger of death, or have died, we realize how precious they are, and in the face of illness and death, all that annoys us about them fades quickly away. In the face of sickness and death, we learn to appreciate the gift of life and love and that we cannot take our relationships, or health, or any part of our life for granted. Therefore, the pandemic challenges us to be still, to return to our center, to a quiet place where we can reflect more deeply on these essential questions of life and to appreciate what God has given us in life, especially through those who love us - our family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers.

The pandemic teaches us to be still and accept the unknown; (when will this end?) We learn to live day by day, one day at a time. I have often heard people say, "We don't know whether we can travel home, or attend this meeting, or celebrate my mother's birthday. My flight was canceled for the third time. What next? There is no vaccine at this moment and the virus is overwhelming our hospitals. How can we and the hospitals cope?" The response I often hear:

“Well, what else can we do but take one day at a time? We have to live day by day.” It’s as though we are forced to live in the present moment, to live as best as we can **one day at a time**. I am reminded of St. Thérèse’s poem: *“Just for Today.”*

My life is but an instant, a passing hour.
My life is but a day that escapes and flies away.
Oh my God! You know that to love you on earth
I only have today!...

Lord, what does it matter if the future is gloomy?
To pray for tomorrow, oh no, I cannot!...
Keep my heart pure, cover me with your shadow
Just for today.

If I think about tomorrow, I fear my fickleness.
I feel sadness and worry arising up in my heart.
But I’m willing, my God, to accept trial and suffering
Just for today.

I’ve just this fleeting day to form
This cluster of love, whose seeds are souls.
Ah! Give me Jesus, the fire of an Apostle
Just for today.

St. Thérèse’s poem is about the fragility and brevity of life. She reminds us that we have only today to live in faith and to show our love for God and others by genuine acts of kindness, generosity and compassion. In the midst of Thérèse’s physical and moral sufferings, and her own interior darkness, Thérèse faced life with extraordinary realism. To love is not a dream or emotion locked in her heart. Love is real and expressed concretely in the here and now, especially in her relationships. Her reflection on fraternal life in Manuscript “C” in the *Story of a Soul* is a profound spiritual treatise on loving others in the present moment and in the midst of darkness and poverty. The importance of the present moment is an essential element of her “way of confidence and love.” *“Let us see only each moment!... A moment is a treasure.”* (GCI, p. 558). *“We have only this short moment of this life to give to God.”* (GCII, 882). *“Ah, let us profit from this short moment of life.”* (GCII, p. 1117). *“I’m suffering only for an instant. It’s because we think of the past and of the future that we become disappointed and fall into despair.”* (*Last Conversations*)

John of the Cross offers wise advice in how we navigate through the dark and murky waters of the dark night experience. His primary counsel is that when we find ourselves in a place of darkness, fragility, and inner poverty, we must strive to remain in peace and quietude. His advice is so simple: Be still and allow God to work within you and the situation. You can’t control God or life, so try to be still and surrender everything to God.

“They should allow the soul to remain in rest and quietude even though it may seem obvious to them they are doing nothing and wasting their time... Through patience and perseverance in prayer, they will be doing a great deal without activity on their part... They must be content simply with a loving and peaceful attentiveness to God, and life without the concern, without the effort, and without the desire to taste or feel him.” (1N.10.4-5)

We need to practice stillness, patience, trust, and loving attentiveness to God, and refrain from trying to figure it all out. We can’t control our lives, or Covid 19. All we can do is strive to remain peacefully attentive to God’s loving presence as best we can and surrender to God in faith, hope and love.

This brings us to an important teaching of St. John of the Cross that can guide us as we live through this time of pandemic darkness and uncertainty. In Chapter 21 of the second book of the *Dark Night*, John of the Cross teaches us the attitudes of heart and mind we need to cultivate as we walk through this dark night. He tells us that we must don a disguise of three colorful garments. These garments give us security and protection against negative forces. They also represent the affections of our heart, of our love for Christ. They are attitudes of a loving heart. These garments are faith, hope and charity, the three theological virtues. They are essential to the doctrine of St. John of the Cross and exemplify what it means to live a contemplative life.

The first garment is a white tunic of faith which is the foundation of all the garments. For John of the Cross, faith is essential in our journey toward God. *“Without faith,”* as the Apostle says, *“it is impossible to please God.”* (Heb. 11:6). God is mystery, a hidden God who transcends our understanding, feelings, and images. God is intimately close to us because he dwells in the depths of our being, but God also transcends all we can think of, imagine, or understand. We can’t grasp God by our intellect, feelings, or images. Therefore, we need the theological virtue of faith to relate to a God who is hidden and mysterious. However, faith is not easy. Faith has its ups and downs. The more I go on in my own life and struggle with the difficulties, trials, and uncertainties of my life, the more I realize the challenge of faith. It is not easy to believe in God’s loving presence when we, or a family member, are infected by a life-threatening illness such as Covid 19, or when our loved ones are dying in ICU without our comforting presence. How difficult it is to trust in God’s providential care when we face losing our business or restaurant which we have successfully built up over the years with such hard work. Where is God when we face eviction from our apartment because we lost our job and cannot pay our rent? The 24-year-old son of a friend of mine was murdered last summer while eating his breakfast at McDonald’s before going to work. For no apparent reason, he was shot point blank. You can imagine how this senseless murder of a young, bright, loving young man shook his mother’s faith. She asked me: “Father Daniel, how can I make sense out of this?” My response: “Only in the broken, bloody body of Jesus Christ on the cross, and his resurrection, can we find any meaning in this tragedy.”

These are real life situations that shake our faith and trust in a faithful and loving God who will never abandon us. In this sense the pandemic challenges our faith and calls us to wear the white garment of faith as a security against doubt and despair. For this reason, we need to pray for an increase of faith. *“Lord, I believe, help my unbelief.”* (Mk. 9:24)

For John, faith is more than an intellectual ascent to the truths of Scripture and the teachings of the Church. This is an aspect of faith, but there is more to faith: faith is a personal relationship with God that does not depend upon images, feelings, or intellectual reasoning. Faith is trusting and loving surrender to God; faith is clinging to God with all our might in every moment; in times of joy and consolation, as well as in times of uncertainty, doubt, and fear.

First of all, we must constantly remind ourselves of God's unconditional love for us. God loves us more than we can comprehend or imagine, even though we may not feel his loving presence on a sensible level. Faith is not a matter of feelings. Julian of Norwich, the English mystic of the 14th century who lived during the Black Death, expressed God's love this way: "*We are so preciously loved by the One who is highest that it is far beyond our comprehension. That is to say, no created being can fully know how much, how sweetly and how tenderly our Creator loves us.*" (*Revelations of Divine Love*, Long text).

We were created out of love and for love. God dwells in the depths of our being. Without his essential and sustaining presence we would not exist. We are never alone, no matter what our circumstances in life. In stanza 32 of the *Spiritual Canticle*, John tells us that God gazes upon us in love. His love enfolds us at every moment of our existence.

*When you looked at me
your eyes imprinted your grace in me;
for this you loved me ardently;
and thus my eyes deserved
to adore what they beheld in you.*

"By the eyes of the Bridegroom she refers to God's mercy; He descends in mercy on the soul, impressing and infusing his love and grace in her, making her beautiful and lifting her so high as to make her a partner of his very divinity." (SC. 32.4) God's gaze descends upon us in mercy and infuses his love within us and transforms us.

God loves us not because we are good or perfect; God loves us because God is Love!

It should be noted for an understanding of this that just as God loves nothing outside himself, he bears no love for anything lower than the love he has for himself. He loves all things for himself, thus love becomes the purpose for which he loves. He therefore does not love things because of what they are in themselves. With God, to love the soul is to put her somehow in himself and make her his equal. Thus he loves the soul within himself, that is, with the very love by which he loves himself. (SC.32.6)

Putting on the white garment of faith implies, therefore, that we open ourselves to God's merciful love and to allow God to love us. It is in quiet prayer, meditating on the Word of God, and celebrating the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist, that we open ourselves to God's loving gaze and allow his gaze to penetrate our hearts and minds and transform us. This is one way we

can understand prayer: taking time to open ourselves to God's loving gaze, keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus Christ so that he can transform us into new men and women. In prayer we grow in deeper faith and love. How much we need prayer at this moment in our history when we are out of control and face our utter fragility and mortality! How much we need to cling to God! To wear the garment of faith means that we strive daily to remember and trust in God's love despite the darkness and uncertainty in this pandemic wave.

John of the Cross has a biblical understanding of faith. In the Bible, the best image for Biblical faith is "God our rock." "I love you, Lord, my strength, Lord, my rock, my fortress, my deliverer, my God, my rock of refuge." (Ps. 18:1-3) Faith beckons us to walk with confidence, courage, perseverance, and constancy amidst the darkness and uncertainties of this pandemic.

"The soul wore her white tunic of faith when she departed on this dark night and walked, as we said, in the midst of interior darknesses and straits, without the comfort of any intellectual light – neither from above, because heaven seemed closed and God hidden, nor from below, because she derived no satisfaction from her spiritual teachers, and suffered with constancy and perseverance, passing through these trials without growing discouraged or failing the Beloved. The Beloved so proves the faith of his bride in tribulations that she can afterward truthfully declare what David says: Because of the words of your lips I have kept hard ways." (Ps. 17:4). (DN.21.5)

Our faith is purified and strengthened through the various trials and sufferings of life. In facing our difficulties with **courage** and **perseverance** we grow in faith and love. St. John of the Cross is convinced that the tribulations and trials of life have the potential to heal us if we accept them in a spirit of faith, hope and love. If embraced with faith in God's love, trials and tribulations cut away "*the roots of our sins and imperfections, our evil habits,*" our sinful pride, and make us more humble, dependent upon God, and compassionate toward others. If embraced in a spirit of faith, suffering unites us to our brothers and sisters in this world who are undergoing so many kinds of suffering. Therefore, John of the Cross exhorts us to live with "*great patience and constancy in all the tribulations and trials God places upon us, whether they be exterior or interior, spiritual or bodily, great or small, and we should accept them as from God's hand as a good remedy and not flee from them.*" (*Living Flame*.2.30) If we find this teaching difficult to accept, we must recall Jesus' teaching: "*Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it.*" (Mk. 8:34-35).

To embrace the cross in this particular time means to embrace the trials of this pandemic with courage and perseverance, to accept the reality that we have no control over our lives, and to surrender our lives to God who is all powerful. We must not give into discouragement, but patiently bear whatever comes with confidence in God's divine providence, learning the lessons the pandemic can teach us.

The second garment we must wear during this dark journey is a green coat of mail. Green signifies the virtue of hope. John of the Cross tells us that hope in God imparts courage and valor because it keeps our eyes fixed on God alone, on heavenly things, and not on ourselves and our

problems. John refers to St. Paul who calls hope *“the helmet of salvation.”* (1 Thes. 5:8) A helmet is a medieval piece of armor that protects the entire head and covers it so there is no opening except a visor through which to see. (2N.21.7) In other words, hope, *“the helmet of salvation,”* protects us from our obsessive thoughts of worry and fear, thinking that we can resolve this pandemic by human initiative alone. I have come to see in my own life that obsessive thinking and worry about a troublesome situation I would like to change, but cannot, is an unconscious form of control. Worry and obsessive thinking does nothing to change the situation about which we are concerned. Hope, as John of the Cross teaches us, empties us of this tendency and keeps our gaze on God who alone can save us. *“Hope so pleases the Beloved that we obtain from God all that we hope for.”* (2N.21.8) In this obscure moment of time, we must keep our eyes fixed on God alone, trusting that God alone can end this trial. Yes, we await a vaccine, and we obey the health restrictions asked of us, which is our human cooperation with God’s healing plan, but ultimately, God alone can lift this dark night of humanity. Hope reminds us that all is passing, and that this pandemic, too, will pass away. While we await a vaccine and a return to normal life, we must keep our eyes fixed on God alone! As St. Teresa tells us: *“God alone suffices.”*

The final garment we must wear at this time is a red toga of charity which adds elegance to the other two colors. *“Charity makes us beautiful and pleasing to God.”* (2N.21.10). There is so much we can say about this red toga of charity and how we wear this livery during this pandemic time. Undoubtedly, the pandemic is a strong and powerful call to grow in love for one another. It makes us aware of others who are suffering and unites us to them. It calls us to be sensitive and protective of others. Mask-wearing, social distancing, and self-isolation are ways we show our love, respect, and compassion for one another. Far from violating our freedom to relate closely to our loved, friends, and neighbors, such restrictions serve to unite us to others on a deeper level and to protect them from this virulent virus that has robbed thousands of their lives, and still does.

Think of the heroic charity of doctors, nurses and health-care workers who risked their lives in caring for Covid victims. Many of them have died as a consequence of their selfless service. I have heard of families who prepared meals for their neighbors who are infected and can’t leave their homes. We see the charity of people who only buy what they need for the moment so that others may have food and supplies. We hear of the charity of those who phone their loved ones, especially the elderly in nursing homes who suffer so intensely from isolation and loneliness.

There are so many ways in which we can wear the red toga of charity. One way in particular is the practice of patience. If there is one virtue that challenges us during the pandemic, it is the virtue of patience. Patience is a sign of love. In St. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, in his hymn to charity, the first quality of love is patience:

“Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous; (love) is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.” (1 Cor. 13:4-8)

St. Paul's hymn includes everything we need to wear the red toga of charity: patience, kindness, generosity, forgiveness, bearing patiently with one another and the restrictions imposed by the pandemic. How much patience is required to suffer and bear the many debilitating and frightening symptoms of Covid 19! How much patience we must practice in the family with so much close and intimate living which can bring out our impatience with one another, our faults, selfish attitudes, and idiosyncrasies. How much patience we need just to bear the uncertainty of when this pandemic will end. We need patience when our travel plans or family dinners are canceled. A wise man once said that patience is the ornament of the brave, the red badge of courage because, like the Beatitude of meekness, it takes great self-control to contain our frustration, the bitter and angry reply, and to respond with patience. In this way, patience is a sign of love. Patience is only learned by practice. It is only by facing the difficulties and trials of daily life that we learn patience and grow in love.

Conclusion

As I wrote in the beginning of this conference, we are living in a time of darkness. Drawing upon John's image of the "dark night of the soul," we can look upon this time as a "global dark night," a "dark night of humanity" when God is drawing us deeper into communion with God and with one another. We can draw inspiration from the wisdom of our Saints: St. John of the Cross, St. Teresa, St. Thérèse – from all our Saints! Let us ask Our Lord for the grace to use this time as a moment of grace, a time of conversion, of deepening our faith, hope, and love.

Let us conclude with wisdom from the bookmark of our Mother, St. Teresa of Jesus:

Let nothing disturb you.
Let nothing frighten you.
All things are passing,
God never changes.
Patience gains all things.
Whoever has God lacks nothing,
God alone suffices.