



Where is God?

Gerry O'Hanlon SJ, author of *The Quiet Revolution of Pope Francis* (Messenger Publications, 2019), reflects on the comforting and inspirational role faith can play in the crisis of a pandemic.



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In the case of a once-in-a-century outbreak like COVID-19, we are shocked. Apart from the enormous disruption at the macro level to industry, commerce, trade, transport, national economies and employment, there are the personal effects.

We recall the reality of illness, death and bereavement for some, the surreal funerals; the courageous service of front-line staff in hospitals, at check-outs in shops or on the streets collecting and emptying our bins.

We recall not being able to come and go, and not being able to meet and greet some loved ones (as well as learning to cope with the omnipresence of other loved ones). We recall also the inability to plan, the uncertainty, the boredom, the mounting anxiety of many, the panic and the terror; we recall the eerie silence of empty streets and closed churches, and the sense of a life suspended.

We all now have an experience of

what Pope Francis likes to call 'the peripheries' – what life is habitually like for so many migrants and asylum seekers, residents of direct provision, the homeless and prisoners.

Nonetheless, even in our secular age, we look to find meaning in what is happening. In a number of thoughtful pieces, journalist Fintan O'Toole has noted how our prized autonomy – so characteristic of the individualism of modernity – is suddenly revealed as threadbare. Concepts like 'solidarity' and 'the common good' have gained new currency. Handwashing and social distancing was presented not just as a personal concern, but as a way of loving the neighbour.

Fintan O'Toole goes on to note that while it is human to seek for meaning, we must not expect from science any more than an account of the kind of natural breakdowns, damage-seeming absurdities that are all part of an evolving universe. For a more heart-warming source of meaning, he turns to fiction and to the thoughts of Viktor Frankl in his classic work *Man's Search for Meaning*, the reflections of a survivor of the Holocaust. At this point O'Toole begins to speak of love, much as the British artist David Hockney, in introducing pieces from Normandy in France celebrating Spring at a time of Coronavirus, stated that 'only two things really matter – food and love'.

I am sure that Fintan O'Toole would be happy to concede that by turning to fiction he does not mean to suggest that what fiction has to offer



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is a lie, and does not contain its own (and very important) kind of truth. Certainly, those of us of Christian faith, based on scriptural stories that are expressed in many different kinds of literary genres (including fiction and myth), cannot stop there. For us the question arises with sharpness and with longing: where is God in all this?

Our God, we believe, is not the God that James Joyce referred to as 'aloof, paring his finger-nails'. While respecting human freedom, and that of the whole of nature and the universe, this is the God who is known as Emmanuel, 'God-with-us', who cares for every one of us and for the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, the God whom Ignatius



in his *Spiritual Exercises* called 'the God who works and labours for me in all creatures', a God 'who conducts himself as one who labours' (SE, 236).

There are some basic insights that emerge from the theological search for meaning: God does not cause the bad things that are happening in the world, including COVID-19. Nor are pandemics punishment for our wickedness and sin, be it personal, social or structural; God is everlastingly compassionate and faithful, and is at work to promote, heal and liberate creation and creatures. Nonetheless, given that 'creation groans in one great act of giving birth' (Rom 8:22), God is also the one who, through the Law of the

Cross, suffers and dies with and for us, so that our suffering and death has meaning in being a redemptive share in his – 'I make up in my body for what is lacking in the suffering of Christ for his Church' (Col 1:24).

God is the one who can bring good out of evil, and because of whom Julian of Norwich could say 'All will be well, all manner of things will be well'. In the meantime we continue, rightly, to ask like the Psalmist with insistence and longing, 'how long Lord' (Ps 13), to complain and lament like Job and also to contemplate with wonder the crucified Jesus of Good Friday, who loves us to bits. We know and believe that he rises again, not without his wounds, and we rejoice.

We look forward to resurrection in all the pain and darkness of life; seeking it in birdsong and blooming cherry blossoms, in the embrace of friends and in convivial and celebratory meals. But also, please God, we look forward to our own conversion, so that we move into a way of living together that respects our planet, values housing and health as shared public and common goods and is less judgemental about those on the peripheries.

Our faith does not just give meaning, it also gives comfort and inspiration. Karl Rahner wrote about love of God and love of neighbour being one, meaning that it is not just that love of God leads us to love our neighbour but rather that, for most of us, our main way to love God is by loving our neighbour. 