Five Tips for Finding God Amidst the Coronavirus Crisis

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By Patrick Manning

This moment is unlike anything that most of us have ever experienced. The tally of sick and deceased mounts higher every day. We turn on the news or look out our windows to see empty streets and darkened buildings. We are cut off from one another, passing our days in varying degrees of isolation. Worries about our health, finances, and the future we had planned dominate our thoughts. Saints like Ignatius of Loyola enjoin us to "find God in all things," yet, in moments of crisis like the present, we may find ourselves wondering, "Where is God in all this?" It may feel to some that God is simply absent.

Although very few of us has ever experienced a situation like this one, generations before us have endured such trials and even greater than this. Their voices echo in our Christian tradition, offering us wisdom that can help us find God amidst the current crisis. These pieces of wisdom are not "tips" in the sense of quick fixes. There is no quick fix for a global health crisis, nor for someone who has lost the sense of God's presence. What follows are rather invitations to be transformed in the awareness and way of being we bring to the present moment. Nothing less will suffice.

#1: Be on the lookout for the unexpected ways God might be working in the crisis.

So much of our fear and anxiety arises from reactive thinking. We obsess over the terrible things that could happen: What if I or my loved ones get sick? What if my business goes under? What if the store runs out of toilet paper? We fixate on what we have lost — our routines, our plans, freedom of movement, maybe even our jobs. Imagining the good that might come out of our current situation comes less easily to us. Yet, when we look back through the history of God's dealings with humanity, we see that God has brought good forth from evil time and again. The crowning example is what the Christian tradition refers to as the felix culpa, the "happy fault." When human beings turned against their Creator and all should have been lost, God responded with an even more gratuitous act of generosity by uniting Godself to humanity in the Incarnation and thereby drawing humanity into the very life of the Trinity. Mindful of God's affinity for turning catastrophe into cause for celebration, we who find ourselves in
the midst of a new catastrophe might take pause to ask ourselves, "What unforeseen good might God bring out of this mess?" or "What if in this moment God is inviting me to…?" I suggest some possibilities below, but I invite you to imagine your own. As Pope Francis highlighted in his recent "urbi et orbi" blessing, the Scriptures repeatedly assure us not to be afraid. We need not be afraid because God does not desire our suffering but rather is constantly working to turn our suffering to joy.

#2: Welcome this moment as a time of Sabbath rest.
COVID-19 has disrupted the business of the world and forced billions of people worldwide to step outside of their normal routines. For many, this means that life has slowed down considerably. That many of us experience this slowing down as something uncomfortable should tell us something about how inhumane our lifestyles have become, how far we have strayed from God's vision for our lives. After creating human beings, God rested and commanded that human beings, too, should rest on the seventh day. The implication seems to be that, if the Creator and Sustainer of the universe can afford to take a day off to appreciate His work, it is rather foolhardy of mere mortals to presume that they cannot afford to do likewise. The Jewish people traditionally observed this time of rest not merely once a week but also by refraining from agricultural activities and forgiving debts every seven years (the Sabbath year). Jewish lore is full of stories of the amazing fruit (spiritual and literal) born of this practice. Although a day of rest was once commonly observed in the United States, today many of us treat it as just another day to get things done. This has been to our detriment. We act as if the salvation of the world depends upon us, and we bear the corresponding mental burden. Now a Sabbath of sorts is being imposed upon us, who would not honor it of our own volition. Now we have no choice but to accept the truth that the Sabbath is intended to ingrain within us — our lives are not totally within our control. We cannot do it all. So rather than lamenting the current disruptions and the affront against our presumed omnipotence, we might welcome the opportunity to rest and to live more humanly as long as this crisis persists... and perhaps even beyond.

#3: Refocus on what is most important in life.
While the pandemic has brought additional stress and work hours upon many medical professionals and workers in essential industries, for many others much of life's daily activity — commuting to work, attending meetings, running errands — has come to an abrupt stop. Again, this may be a gift that we never would have given ourselves. Many of us have been living like Jesus' friend Martha, who was overwhelmed by all the work to be done. We have been so beholden to our to-do lists that we have lost sight of what is most important. Now, however, in the midst of a global slowdown, we may finally be able to hear Jesus' words to Martha as something intended for us: "you are worried and distracted by many things. There is need of only one thing" (Lk 10:41). Jesus makes clear what is that "one necessary thing" earlier in the chapter (Lk 10:27), but it is worth mulling over for ourselves what is most important in life and whether our daily living actually reflects those priorities. We might ask, "Have I chosen a life in which sending one more email takes priority over tucking my child into bed at night or chosen a bigger paycheck at the expense of my physical and mental wellness?" Life will be changed after this crisis. That much is for sure. Whether or not it turns out to be a change for the
better is somewhat dependent on our ability to reevaluate our priorities, make decisions, and form habits in line with what matters most.

#4: Spend time with God in prayer.
The doors of retail stores are locked, tables at restaurants sit empty, the lights of Broadway's theaters have gone down—all because of the COVID crisis. Our world has grown quieter, and, like inactivity, that quiet can be unsettling for those of us who are accustomed to constant noise. Although we may initially perceive it as a threat, this quiet is an invitation. Blaise Pascal once wrote, "All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone." We focus our attention "out there" because we are afraid of confronting what is "in here." Yet the wisdom of the saints and mystics suggests that our efforts to find fulfillment out there are doomed to fail. The secret is that we already possess within us all that we need. We simply do not sit still enough or quiet enough to be able to recognize it. Now many of us find ourselves prevented from engaging in our usual incessant activity and deprived of many of our habitual diversions. What if, rather than filling the time and silence with extra hours on Netflix, we embraced the silence and endeavored to listen more attentively to the Voice that has been calling to us from within all along? And what if, in the moments when those afflictive thoughts mentioned above in #1 are growing louder and louder, we met those thoughts with silence or perhaps a simple prayer like "Come, Holy Spirit"? If the experience of people like Teresa of Avila, Brother Lawrence, and Cardinal Nguyen Van Thuan is any indication, we would discover greater peace, joy, and gratitude in our days, even in the most difficult of circumstances. Should we follow their example and accept this invitation to prayer, we might just find that when the world is again open to us we are less dependent upon that outside world for our feelings of contentment and self-worth.

#5: Connect more deeply with the people in your life.
Perhaps the most difficult aspect of our current situation is the isolation many of us are enduring. The crowds that normally surround us in the office, on the train, and in coffee shops have now dispersed. We are unable to visit with friends and family. Yet there may be an opportunity even in this. If it is true that absence makes the heart grow fonder, then perhaps this time of separation will engender in us a greater appreciation for the people in our lives. And we need not wait passively for this period of separation to take its effect. We are blessed to live in an age of unprecedented connectivity wherein we have the technological capacity to see and speak with people thousands of miles away. With fewer people and duties to make demands upon us, we have the freedom and the time to connect more deeply with the people who mean the most to us. At the same time, we have the opportunity to reach out (by phone, Skype, handwritten letters) to those who are most in need and to be the face of God for those who are enduring the greatest suffering. For, in the words of Saint Augustine, "you see the Trinity if you see love." This is our greatest human desire — to be loved. The pandemic has disrupted many aspects of our lives, but it has not and cannot prevent us from communicating love to one another. It may actually be providing us the opportunity and the motivation to let love abound all the more. What is certain above all else in this time when so much is uncertain is that "nothing can separate us from God's love" (Rom 8:38).
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