



# SOLIDARITY AND HOPE IN THE MIDST OF THE PANDEMIC

## A Personal Reflection

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I must say that the reflections of Bishop Jorge set me thinking. I am part of the staff in a seminary in India where Holy Cross seminarians from all over the country come to study Philosophy and Theology. Different varieties of philosophies, interpretations of Scriptures, and in depth studies of Church documents usually keep us busy. But from March 2020, it all began to blur. The description of the times by Pope Francis as **a dense darkness that crept into our land** is applicable to Indian situation too.

In this short sharing, I would like to focus on two points that Bishop pointed out that I can relate to based on my experience of the past nine months here.

First, we discovered new implications in calling ourselves a family. In the formation house I minister, the seminarians completed their academic year in March 2020. But they decided not to go home for holidays because they were afraid that they would catch the virus while traveling home and accidentally put the lives of their parents, grandparents or little ones at risk. They let go of all the plans they had made and the tickets they booked. Even in the seminary, everyone became more attentive to the health of the two senior priests who lived with us. Everyone agreed that we would go out only for emergencies. We also agreed on a protocol regarding the steps to take if someone did have to venture out.

It was beautiful to see how both in words and in action, the health of our vulnerable seniors was given such primacy. Our Constitutions say that 'we strengthen our bonds of fraternity by living together in community... and we get to know each other very closely.' I believe that the crisis we encountered gave us a new understanding of the sacrifices we are capable of in order to protect our loved ones.

The second lesson I can relate to is the rediscovery of the interconnectedness of everyone in the society. I remember how we, at the seminary, would closely monitor the ups and downs of infection not just in India, but in other parts of the world; how we prayed for a cure or a vaccine that may be developed *anywhere* in the world. We remembered gratefully, and sometimes tearfully, the sacrifices made by doctors, nurses and other medical and emergency personnel.

At the very beginning of the nation-wide lockdown itself, we spoke about the countless poor and daily wage earners who suddenly found themselves out of work and livelihood. Though we decided not to be adventurous, to protect the health of our senior confreres, we knew we could not sit idle.

No one quoted the Constitutions, or official documents of the Church, but it was clear to us that we needed to do something. As a community, we decided to cut into our food allocation, and provide rations to the poor families around the seminary. The seminarians packed the essential items themselves, and reached out to over 120 families with enough provisions for an average family to manage for two weeks.

A month later, seeing that situation had not become better, we did it again: this time for over 70 families. I was truly inspired by the commitment of our seminarians, who willingly let go a good amount from their food allocation. The understanding was that we will manage our food with what remained. Edified as I was about this, it turned out that I underestimated the generosity of our seminarians.

Yet again, they said we needed to do more. This time, they volunteered to spend from the annual allowance for their personal expenses. Once again, my younger brothers had proven how much they felt responsible for the well-being of the poor: poor whom they did not know personally at all. We, as a community, never came this close to recognizing how much we are connected to everyone else around us. In fact, I do not think we *discovered* interconnectedness. We have studied about it and we have talked about it, but I think we did discover how much it mattered to us in an experiential way.

When I look back at the months of social distancing and lockdown, I have plenty of heart-breaking images of the migrants, the slum-dwellers, and daily wage earners, but I also have the heart-warming images of rediscovering our humanity, our interconnectedness and our family spirit. My teachers for this and my inspiration were right here in my community who showed unprecedented sacrifice: sacrifice of their holidays due to love for their own family, sacrifice of their personal freedom recognizing Holy Cross as their family, and sacrificing their food and personal allowance for the poor.

I think the crisis brought on by the virus exposed how vulnerable we are. But I believe it also brought out the best in us. I believe we brought hope to many families around us, regardless of what it cost us; because that is what makes us who we are.

We are Holy Cross. We are men with hope to bring.