

Ill with the Coronavirus: an experience of universality

# Suffering in the heart enables it to open

Egidio Canil ofm

*Many religious and consecrated have lived the plague of the Coronavirus. Many times without knowing how, they have been taken by the tide of Covid-19 and even had to be hospitalized. They are the ones who, having experienced it at first hand, can tell us about the new horizon that such an experience can show us and what are the lessons to be learned. Fr. Egidio Canil, a Franciscan conventual became ill and was in isolation for 40 days. He lives in Padua at the Basilica of St. Anthony and is at the same time a member of the International Center of religious who adhere to the Focolare Movement.*

The Coronavirus unexpectedly entered my life as well. I was declared "positive", together with some of my brothers, on March 19. I was immediately forced to live completely segregated from the rest of the community. It was quarantine that lasted 40 days. My only symptom was a rather high fever that stayed with me for several days both in the monastery and in the hospital. In all probability the virus most likely weakened my heart.

It was an experience that did not prevent me from continuing to love my brothers, to connect with and support the other brothers who were in isolation like me, and to show my gratitude to the healthy brothers for all the care they had for us.

Many times, forgetting myself, I found myself "rejoicing" in this trial because it pushed me to live my illness in communion with so many other brothers and sisters in the world who had been affected by the same virus!

## **The support of unity and the prayers of many**

During the heaviest and most difficult days of the infection, I was greatly sustained and uplifted by the solidarity through

the signs of unity and prayers that so many people from various parts of the world sent me. There was also support from numerous Franciscans and those of other religious orders, as well as many other friends and members of the Focolare Movement, including Maria Voce, the president, and Jesús Morán, the co-president.

Of particular strength and support were the prayers sent through Focolare contacts and others from brothers and sisters of other religions. For many years I have been in Assisi where I have participated in inter-religious meetings and have been able to get to know and establish relationships with Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim brothers and sisters and, at

the same time, with members of other Christian Churches. Having learned of my illness, they sent me many expressions of closeness and assured me of their prayers.

### **The remembrance by people of other faiths**

I have also received prayers from many Muslim brothers in Italy, but what struck me and gave me further strength were those of my brother monks who are Buddhists from Thailand and Taiwan and whom I had met in Assisi when I had gone to visit their countries. I was struck above all by the daily prayers of two little girls, daughters of a Buddhist professor from Bangkok, whom I had met on my trip to Thailand.

On my travels I had also been to Indonesia, Lithuania, and North Macedonia: there too they prayed for me, including in the latter brother Orthodox monks whom I had visited. It was natural for me to give thanks and at the same time offer everything so that the pandemic would not affect the countries from which these prayers came.

### **At the "school" of the Coronavirus**

I am truly grateful to God for these 40 days of isolation. They have allowed me to find a new and deeper relationships within myself, first of all with God himself, with the preciousness of the Word of God, with prayer and constant union with him.

But also I found truer, more fraternal relationships with the brothers of the community, with many members of the Focolare Movement, with many other brothers, with many, many people. I never felt alone! All these relationships have always supported me, helped me, but also, dare I say it, "forced" me to get out of myself, to not stop loving and to open up to everyone. Even if the virus has affected my heart a little, the experience of the pandemic has enlarged it, expanded it to take in everything and everyone, especially the wounds and dramas of all humanity. It has been a living experience of universality that I really did not expect, given that the "normal" tendency when we are sick is instead to enclose ourselves in our own world. One can see that illness, if lived in a certain way, generates a bigger heart.