

# Coronavirus is depriving us of touch, the nourishment of our humanity

By Fr Timothy Radcliffe OP, 1 April 2020



The Perugia Altarpiece, Side Panel Depicting St Dominic. Image: Wikimedia Commons.

## Timothy Radcliffe ponders the 'new world' being created by necessary social distancing

Queuing up to go through security in Tel Aviv airport last week, I was fascinated by the balletic movements of the man in front of me.

He almost danced as he maneuvered his suitcases so that no one could be nearer to him than two meters.

He was probably wise, but for me he vividly evoked two aspects of the new world in which we live as best we can.

First of all, insecurity. The menace of death hangs in the air, literally. We are vulnerable.

### Living well now and being grateful

When I had cancer three years ago, I was confronted with my own mortality. This is different since it touches all whom we love.

The two people to whom I am closest in my community in Blackfriars are both at high risk. One of them is only fifty. But he already has an illness, which means he has no immunity at all.

Both of them are the brothers with whom I have been on holidays every year for many years. Maybe I never will again.

The only way that I can respond is to enjoy them now. Their lives are a gift for which I can give thanks every day.

I went and bought a bottle of wine so that I can have a drink with the one who can still share space with me.

Gratitude floods my being. We shall have a wonderful evening. But he has just phoned to say we must delay since he is not well.

### **We need proximity and touch, hugs and kisses**

The young man with the suitcases also was an image of isolation.

Every stranger, and even friend, is seen as a possible threat to one's life, and I to him or her. Safety is found only in keeping apart.

But how can we live in isolation? We need proximity and touch, hugs and kisses, to be really alive.

In the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo shows God's finger touching Adam into life. We are all the hands of the life-giving God when we touch others with kindness and respect.

Touch is the nourishment of our humanity. Grandparents and grandchildren who cannot hug each other are living a deep deprivation!

### **Cyberspace is not the same, but...**

I am deeply grateful, as never before, for living in a community, so that even in this terrible time, I can leave my room and find brethren.

And I live in a beautiful city filled with parks in which I can walk and see the signs of spring. I have no reason to complain.

But millions of people are deprived of the physical closeness that we need to flourish.

On the other hand, cyberspace is filled with messages expressing love and care. 'Are you alright?' 'Have you got back from Israel?'

I have received three since I began to write this short piece.

Suddenly, when I must not touch, I am in touch with people whom I have not seen for years. Yes, there is isolation, but also a new and wide communion of those who care.

Of course it is not the same. I miss the faces of those whom I love.

### **Confessions of a first-time 'Skyper'**

Yesterday for the first time in my life – what a confession! – I used Skype. I contacted a friend who lives abroad to find out how he was.

In the evening I skyped the other brother who is isolated from us all. It was better than nothing, but it is not the same as seeing a face three dimensionally.

Usually we do not sit in front of screens staring each other. Faces are best seen in side-glances, unexpected glimpses, caught unawares when one enters a room.

We do not stare at the faces of those whom we love, as we focus relentlessly at the screen when we Skype or Zoom. When we are physically together, we look at each other gently, discreetly, from every angle.

The brother whom I first skyped told me that in Hebrew, faces give light. It is as if the light shines forth from our eyes, illuminating those whom we love.

We bask in their radiance, like sunbathers on a beach; we rest in their gaze. I miss so many faces at the moment.

### **Fasting from the shared intimacy of the Body of Christ**

And touch! Yesterday we celebrated the last of our public Eucharists for a while. As we processed out a friend waved. We will be fasting from the shared intimacy of the Body of Christ.

The early Christians shocked the pagans by the intimacy of our touch in the kiss of peace. It was really a kiss on the mouth! All that stops for the moment.

How can we deprive people of the Eucharist?

Interiorly, I rebelled against the Church's decision to close all public liturgies, even though rationally I know it is unavoidable.

Of course, pastoral work and the hearing of confessions still continue, often discreetly on benches in gardens, letting the fresh air keep us from mutual contagion.

### **The joy of preaching comes from faces**

As members of the Order of Preachers we must find every way we can to proclaim the gospel. Our Dominican students are exploring new ways of reaching out on the web; our university classes will be on-line.

Never has there been such a vast effort to reach out with the gospel on the digital continent. Wonderful!

And yet most of the joy of preaching comes from the faces, the smiles and the laughter, of the people one is addressing.

St Augustine says that we should teach with *Hilaritas*, exuberance and even ecstasy.

It is intensely mutual. When the occasion is blessed, the preacher and the people inspire each other.

A fifteenth century Sufi imam, Mullah Nasrudin, said: "I talk all day, but when I see someone's eyes blaze, then I write it down."

So for me this is both a time of intense communion but also of deprivation, of rediscovered friends and of absence, of reaching out but not touching.

All that we lose in this time of plague will, we hope and trust, be recovered before too long. The coronavirus will pass.

### **Something good from this contagion**

But something is in the air that may be contagious for the good. I pray that we in Britain may look back to this time as when we recovered some sense of being a single national community.

The Conservative government made an extraordinary announcement: If a company lays off an employee from work, rather than dismissing them, the government will pay 80% of their wages.

This is an intervention of the State that is unparalleled in the history of Britain and the cost of which is hard to imagine.

But slowly our politicians are coming to realize that unless such drastic action is taken in favor of the poorest, the people on zero hours contracts, those who earn least, the result might be a social unrest that Europe has not seen since the French Revolution.

### **A single human community from which we cannot exit**

We can only survive as a society by radical change. The vast inequalities of wealth have so weakened our common bonds that extreme financial suffering could provoke social dissolution.

The cry of conservative politicians ever since the financial crisis of 2008 has been 'We are all in this together'. But it was not true.

Maybe at least some of the political elite needs to see that if we are not really all in this together, the consequences will be almost unthinkable.

Of course, as unshakeable European, I hope that we may eventually come to see that we cannot flourish without our European friends as well!

Brexit could not have happened at a more unfortunate moment.

Let us hope that we shall discover that just as the virus reaches beyond national boundaries and does not need visas, so we shall renew our sense that we belong to a single human community from which no exit is possible.

### ***Post scriptum: What I have learnt***

I was at the Tel Aviv airport, returning home from a month with my brethren at the *Ecole Biblique* of Jerusalem.

The virus had disrupted life of the Ecole; most of the professors had been stranded abroad, unable to return, but I still had a wonderful time reading the latest research on the New Testament.

After almost 50 years of priesthood, and incessant preaching, teaching and writing, I was having a break. It was time for a Sabbath.

But after a month, I was becoming hungry to work again. I had lectures to prepare for the summer in America, France and England.

Now they are all cancelled. There are just a few articles to write about the crisis. Thank you *La Croix* for asking me!

I have discovered that I am more driven by tasks and goals than I had realized. Now I must learn to live differently, which most people have to at my age of almost 75!

An Australian friend had sent me CDs of his favorite composers. Can I learn just to sit back and listen, even in the middle of the morning?

Will I read a Shakespearean play just because it is wonderful and for the pure pleasure of it?

Can I live in this moment, attending to the people who need me now, and be content even if no one calls?

Can I learn that I do not have to justify my existence and prove to others that my life is worthwhile?

I can just live, day by day.

This Sabbatical time invites me to prepare for the coming Sabbath of the Lord, when we shall rest in his peace.

The twelfth century theologian Peter Abelard evoked this glimpse of the end of the journey:

There Sabbath unto Sabbath

Succeeds eternally,

The joy that has no ending

Of souls in holiday

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