

BEYOND THE PANDEMIC

Spiritual and Ecological Challenges



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Introduction

From the great trials of humanity—among them this pandemic—one emerges better or worse. You don't emerge the same. I ask this of you: how do you want to come out of it? Better or worse?

—POPE FRANCIS

For many years to come people will remember and recall their experience of 2020, the year when the whole world was engulfed in a global crisis. Some countries were less impacted than others until we moved into 2021 and the virus mutated into variants, some of which became even more contagious than the initial strain. Now every nation was affected.

Meanwhile, in late December 2020, the first vaccine was approved, and by the end of 2021 many developed nations were 90 percent vaccinated. But the vaccines had not reached the bulk of the human population, and therefore the prospect of herd immunity as a defense against future illness was still highly uncertain.

Initially, the virus generated a range of reflective responses, purporting that this was a humanly induced crisis related to our reckless exploitation of the natural world. In the long term we began to realize that it could only be resolved by drastic changes in our entire way of living. Terms like a “new reset” and “new normal” were extensively adopted.

However, the virus began to take a heavy social and economic toll. In just a matter of a few weeks many businesses ground to a halt, schools and universities were closed, and travel was severely restricted. At the same time the medical profession went into overdrive, battling a disease that was

extremely difficult to prevent from spreading. Governments scrambled to contain a crisis that defied much of their power and wisdom. And the scientific community scurried around for any clue that might lead to a vaccine and a cure.

The vaccine(s) arrived, much quicker than initially anticipated. The World Health Organization and many world leaders hailed this as the great breakthrough for which we had all been waiting. However, few seem to have noted that while the vaccines have helped to prevent the spread and severity of COVID-19, its underlying causes were left unexamined. Everybody wanted a quick fix, and for millions it worked, until the end of 2021, when the new Omicron variant spread rapidly, generating yet another pharmaceutical-led response as earlier vaccine doses were considered inadequate and the focus shifted to the need for booster doses. From here on, the unarticulated consensus was that we must learn to live with this virus. And that leaves us with the tantalizing question: What have we learned from it?

Several books and articles have been written on what the World Economic Forum (of June 2020) called the “Great Reset,” with attention given mainly to the social, political, and economic readjustments that need to be made on a global scale. Few of those written sources noted that for the World Economic Forum the Great Reset began with the need for a shift in consciousness. It was the very first item on the list, yet bypassed by several commentators.

It is that consciousness reset that I seek to explore in the present work. I want to address the serious neglect of a major underlying dimension without which we cannot hope to address in a responsible and creative way all the other major challenges ensuing from COVID-19. I am adopting an old scholastic dictum from my seminary days: action follows thought. How we think and perceive determines the quality of our behavior, locally and globally.

And central to such a reconstruction is the notion of spirituality. This has scarcely been mentioned throughout the entire COVID-19 pandemic. Without an empowering and liberating spirituality there can be no reset—at any level! And it will

probably be just a short few years until humanity has to deal with an even more devastating crisis, global warming being just one of the dark clouds on the impending horizon.

In the opening quote of this introduction Pope Francis asks if we are coming out of the pandemic better or worse. As many countries reopen to normal business, we are behaving as if we have eliminated the serious health threat. Yet variants remain virulent, causing infection and death. Life is better when compared to the harsh experience of lockdown, but our health as a global species remains extremely vulnerable and faces an uncertain future.

Consciousness, spirituality—and now I will add the word *discernment*. To date, these are the missing dimensions without which we cannot hope to move to the better future that Pope Francis, world leaders, and all of us desire. I hope the reflections of this book will help us move to that deep layer of reflection and analysis, and to the practical strategies that will engender genuine hope.