

# Restoring the bonds

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L: A brother shopping (Santiago de Chile).  
R.: A brother celebrating the sacrament of the sick in Bagong Silang (Philippines).



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Dear Brothers,

I write this letter from Chile, where together with Fernando Cordero, we find ourselves confined by the restrictions imposed on us by the coronavirus. You are probably reading this letter under similar conditions of restriction of movement and meetings. Some of our communities like Teteringen, in Holland have been strongly affected by the death in just a few days of several of our brothers, or of close relatives. Others are suffering on account of a lack of visits and family contacts. I am thinking especially of the communities of mainly older brothers or the nursing homes or the brothers in hospitals.

We never imagined that we would see ourselves in this way, isolated from one another and yet "under the same roof", confined to our houses and communities and yet susceptible to various needs: material needs, the need for bonding, the need for contact with others and also our own needs. We are constantly instructed to: "stay at home". Perhaps never before have we been so aware of the domestic life of our communities as well as the need for respite for our common home, the planet. And all of this interspersed with feelings of uncertainty about what will come, with fear of contracting the disease, fear of losing control and being unable to plan our lives, a defencelessness in the face of a vulnerability that is part of our lives, but which we perceive today as a threat. The pandemic has also helped us see, more close at hand, the situations of poverty of the many people who have always been there: elderly people who live alone or whose families are far away or who have been forgotten; poor families crammed into narrow houses for whom staying at home is more of a risk than a protection; the lack of access to social networks, so precious these days, for many children and young people to complete education online; face-to-face classes for many digitally illiterate adults. And we are already seeing signs of serious social and economic consequences of this pandemic, not only for the globalised economies of our

countries, but also for families, and for the places of work that allow us to bring our bread home.

In synthesis, the measures of social distancing have made us especially sensitive to the need and importance of connectedness - our shared vulnerability at a planetary level has made us feel in our own flesh the precariousness situations of the poor who are in our neighbourhood, in our city or country.

### **And what has happened in our communities?**

In our communities too, there has been a need for generosity and creativity to enrich our daily routines of food and prayer meetings. In many houses it has been an occasion to introduce other topics of conversation, especially when our various activities and ministries have been restricted. Perhaps, some of the tensions that

**"In our communities there has been a need for generosity and creativity"**

can exist among brothers have been relativized in the face of more urgent matters or, unfortunately, they may have worsened. In any case, it has been a time to relearn how to be together, no longer in the apostolate, but in the simple and hidden daily life, respecting each other's rhythms and needs, accompanying each other with patience, so that any acrimony present does not become more acute and harm others. I know of communities that have intensified their prayer and adoration. Some have even created spaces to play and rest together at home. In many communities the brothers have taken on the domestic tasks of cleaning, washing, cooking, gardening, etc. We have also sought different ways to be close to our Christian communities, through liturgical celebrations accessible through social networks, courses, retreats, prayers, even games and recreational activities to do at home. Our Eucharistic celebrations in our chapels have been enriched by sharing more about the Word and we have brought the people who ask us to pray for them into our prayers. Or maybe we have simply placed ourselves in the silence of adoration at the feet of Jesus presenting him with our humanity, hoping for health and peace and asking the Lord what it is that he want from us. How good it has been for our faith in this time of pandemic to live it in such a homely and familiar way, attentive to the life of the world and to our brothers and sisters!

There have also been charitable initiatives, such as helping with food or medicine, or the soup kitchens where one can find food and shelter. And the precious service of listening to the brother at home or to the people who are alone or who suffer most from the measures of isolation: the sick, the elderly, the differently able, prisoners. This capacity to respond quickly to the needs of the poor, networking with other state institutions or other denominations, are perhaps embodiments of the longed-for ways of being and serving as Church.

During this Easter time, the words of the Risen Lord to his disciples "Peace be with you" resound with special strength. He spoke these words in the midst of the fears that the disciples were experiencing and understood the difficulties they had in recognising him alive after having seen him die. To make his new presence credible, the Risen One patiently sought to restore the bonds broken by his death. His words touched the heart of each disciple, lifting the sadness that blinded them from understanding the Scriptures and with his gestures he opened them to the hospitality of his discreet presence. He also restored and strengthened the bonds among the disciples. Thomas' wanting to see the mark of the nails and the wounded side in the flesh of the Risen One, was as if he was asking the Lord not to forget our nor humanity's sufferings. Mary Magdalene in seeking the dead body of her



beloved Jesus, finds her Master, the Risen Lord. Finally, he deepens the relationship he has with his disciples. For this to happen, Mary Magdalene must let him go and tell the disciples that from now on they will find him, more than ever, in their brother and sister and that his Father is the Father of them all. And so that these new bonds of the risen Jesus are made visible, he becomes present in the midst of the community gathered in his memory and in his name. It is there that he is saying "Peace be with you", it is from there that the news of the witnesses who have seen the Risen Jesus circulates and grows. It is the Spirit that Jesus breathes on his disciples and which continues to animate his Church that makes our hearts burn and gives us the intelligence to read the Scriptures and history and to recognize his risen footprints.

This same Spirit raises up men and women to be close to those who are suffering, as our brother Damien was with his companions who

lived with misfortune and hope on Molokai. It is impressive to see how Damien sought to tell them how much God loved them and had not abandoned them. For those who had been forcibly torn away from all family and social ties, Damien became close to them, sharing with them their homes, their food, their long waits, the warmth of the bonds created in their condition of confinement, their illness and their death. Always with them and encouraged by the fidelity of the Good Lord Jesus, he cared for the bodies of the living and the dead. And with them, crossing confessional boundaries, he adored the Lord present in the Eucharist and served him in the lepers.

### **What will happen after this Pandemic?**

We really don't know. What we do know and wish for is that things do not go on as before. And just as we will have to learn to live with the coronavirus in our body until we can find an antidote, my hope is that what we have learned in these times will not be forgotten: a humanity more reconciled to its vulnerability; finding ways to inhabit our planet more as caregivers than as predators; being closer to and living more interdependently with each other; as individuals and as communities walking together with our brothers and sisters, carrying their sorrows and sadness on our backs, as Jesus did with the disciples of Emmaus, as Damien did with his fellow companions, in Molokai.

Fraternally,

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*Superior General*