

The courage to be completely open

From crisis to a new beginning

Pope Francis

Addressing the Roman Curia on December 21, 2020, Pope Francis offered a profound reflection on the meaning of personal, social and ecclesial crises and the opportunities for rebirth which these can bring. Below are excerpts from that address, an address that leads us to the heart and focus of this new issue of Ekklesia.

A crisis is something that affects everyone and everything. Crises are present everywhere and in every age of history, involving ideologies, politics, the economy, technology, ecology and religion. A crisis is a necessary moment in the history of individuals and society. It appears as an extraordinary event that always creates a sense of trepidation, anxiety, upset and uncertainty in the face of decisions to be made. We see this in the etymological root of the verb *krino*: a crisis is the sifting that separates the wheat from the chaff after the harvest.

The Bible itself is filled with individuals who were “sifted”, “people in crisis” who by that very crisis played their part in the history of salvation [...]

We could continue with this list of biblical figures in which each of us could find his or her own place. There are so many of them...

Yet the most eloquent crisis was that of Jesus. The Synoptic Gospels point out that he began his public life by experiencing the crisis of temptation [...] Jesus was then to face an indescribable crisis in Gethsemane: solitude, fear, anguish, the betrayal of Judas and abandonment by his Apostles (cf. Mt 26:36-50). Finally, there was the extreme crisis on the cross: an experience of solidarity with sinners even to the point of feeling abandoned by the Father (cf. Mt 27:46). Yet with utter confidence he “commended his spirit into the hands of the Father” (cf. Lk 23:46). His complete and trusting surrender opened the way to the resurrection (cf. Heb 5:7).

Brothers and sisters, this reflection on crisis warns us against hastily judging the Church based on the crises caused by scandals past and present. [...].

Those who fail to view a crisis in the light of the Gospel simply perform an autopsy on a cadaver. They see the crisis but not the hope and the light brought by the Gospel. We are troubled by crises not simply because we have forgotten how to see them as the Gospel tells us to, but because we have forgotten that the Gospel is the first to put us in crisis.¹ If we can recover the courage and humility to admit that a time of crisis is a time of the Spirit, whenever we are faced with the experience of darkness, weakness, vulnerability, contradiction and loss, we will no longer feel overwhelmed. Instead, we will keep trusting that things are about to take a new shape, emerging exclusively from the experience of a

grace hidden in the darkness. "For gold is tested in the fire and those found acceptable, in the furnace of humiliation" (Sir 2:5). [...]

The newness born of crisis and willed by the Spirit is never a newness opposed to the old, but one that springs from the old and makes it continually fruitful. Jesus explains this process in a simple and clear image: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (Jn 12:24). The dying of a seed is ambivalent: it is both an end and the beginning of something new. It can be called both "death and decay" and "birth and blossoming", for the two are one. We see an end, while at the same time, in that end a new beginning is taking shape.

In this sense, our unwillingness to enter into crisis and to let ourselves be led by the Spirit at times of trial condemns us to remaining forlorn and fruitless, or even in conflict. By shielding ourselves from crisis, we hinder the work of God's grace, which would manifest itself in us and through us. If a certain realism leads us to see our recent history only as a series of mishaps, scandals and failings, sins and contradictions, short-circuits and setbacks in our witness, we should not fear. Nor should we deny everything in ourselves and in our communities that is evidently tainted by death and calls for conversion. Everything evil, wrong, weak and unhealthy that comes to light serves as a forceful reminder of our need to die to a way of living, thinking and acting that does not reflect the Gospel. Only by dying to a certain mentality will we be able to make room for the newness that the Spirit constantly awakens in the heart of the Church. The Fathers of the Church were well aware of this, and they called it "metanoia".

Every crisis contains a rightful demand for renewal and a step forward. If we really desire renewal, though, we must have the courage to be completely open [...].

¹ "Many of his disciples, when they heard it, said, 'This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?' But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples murmured at it, said to them, 'Do you take offense at this?'" (Jn 6:60-61). Yet it was only on the basis of that crisis that a profession of faith could spring up: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (Jn 6:68).