



# THE CORONAVIRUS AND PROVIDENCE

*Posted on April 1, 2020 by Roberto de Mattei*



The theme of my conversation is, the new scenarios in Italy and in Europe during and after the Coronavirus crisis. I will not speak about this theme from a medical or scientific point of view, as I do not have this competence. I will instead consider the argument from three other points of view: The point of view of a scholar of the political and social sciences; the point of view of a historian; and the point of view of a philosopher of history.

### **As A Scholar Of The Social Sciences**

Political and social sciences study human behavior in its social, political and geopolitical context. From this point of view, I am not inquiring into the origins of the Coronavirus and its nature, but rather the social consequences that are happening and will happen.

An epidemic is the diffusion on the national or world scale (in this case it is called a pandemic) of an infective illness that afflicts a large number of individuals of a determined population in a very brief span of time. The Coronavirus, which has been renamed Covid-19, is an infective illness that began to spread through the world from China. Italy is the Western nation that is now apparently the most afflicted by it.

Why is Italy under quarantine today? Because, as the most attentive observers have understood from the very beginning, the problem of the Coronavirus is not its fatality rate but the rapidity with which the contagion spreads among the population. Everyone agrees that the illness in itself is not terribly lethal. A sick person who contracts the Coronavirus and is assisted by specialized health care personnel in well-equipped health care facilities can heal.

But if, because of the rapid spread of the contagion, which can potentially strike millions of people simultaneously, the number of sick people rapidly increases, there will not be enough health care facilities and personnel – the sick will die because they are deprived of the necessary care. In order to cure grave cases, it is necessary to have the support of intensive care in order to ventilate the lungs. If this support is lacking, the patients die. If the number of those who are sick increases, health care structures are not capable of offering intensive care to everyone and an ever greater number of patients will succumb to the disease.

Epidemiological projections are inexorable and they justify the precautions being taken. "If uncontrolled, the Coronavirus could strike the entire Italian population, but let's say that in the end only 30% become infected, that would be about 20 million people. Let's say that out of these – reducing the rate – 10% go into crisis, meaning that without intensive care they will succumb to the disease. This would mean that 2 million people die directly, plus all of those who will die indirectly as a result of the collapse of the health care system and the social and economic order."

The collapse of the health care system, in turn, would have other consequences. The first is the collapse of the nation's production system.

Economic crises usually arise from the lack of either supply or demand. But if consumers must remain at home and stores are closed, and those selling goods cannot get their products to market because of logistical breakdown, then the supply chain collapses.

The central banks would not be capable of saving such a situation: "The crisis after the Coronavirus does not have a monetary solution" writes Maurizio Ricci in *La Repubblica* on February 28. Stefano Feltri in turn observes: "The typical Keynesian recipes – creating jobs and artificial demand with public money – are not practical when the workers do not leave their homes, trucks do not circulate, stadiums are closed and people do not schedule vacations or work trips because they are sick at home or afraid of the contagion. Aside from avoiding liquidity crises for businesses by suspending tax payments and interest payments to banks, the political system is powerless. A government decree is not enough to reorganize the supply chain."

The expression "perfect storm" was coined several years ago by the economist [Nouriel Roubini](#) to indicate a mix of financial conditions that are such that it leads to a collapse of the market. "There will be a global recession due to Coronavirus", Roubini declares, adding: "This crisis will spill over and result in a disaster."

Roubini's forecasts have been confirmed by the drop in the price of oil after the failure of OPEC to agree with Saudi Arabia, which has decided to increase its production and cut prices in defiance of Russia; and Roubini will likely be further vindicated as events unfold.

The weak point of globalization is interconnection, the talisman word of our time, from the economy to religion. Pope Francis' [Querida Amazonia](#) is a hymn to interconnection. But today the global system is fragile precisely because it is so interconnected. And the system of distribution of products is one of the

chains of this economic interconnection. It is not a problem of the markets but of real economy. Not only finance but also industry, commerce, and agriculture, that is to say, the pillars of the economy of a nation, can all collapse, if the system of production and distribution enters into a crisis.

But there is another point that becomes evident – there is not only the collapse of the health system; there is not only a possible crack in the economy; but there can also be a collapse of the state and public authority – in a word, social anarchy. The riots in Italian prisons indicate a trend in this direction.

Epidemics have psychological consequences because of the panic that they can provoke. Between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, social psychology was born as a science. One of its first exponents was [Gustave Le Bon](#), the author of a famous book, entitled, *Psychologie des foules* ([Psychology of Crowds](#), 1895).

Analyzing collective behavior, Le Bon explains how in a crowd the individual undergoes a psychological change by which feelings and passions are transmitted from one individual to another, “by contagion,” like that which happens with infectious diseases.

The modern theory of contagion, which was inspired by Le Bon, explains how, protected by the anonymity of a crowd, the calmest individual can become aggressive, acting at the suggestion of others or in imitation of them. Panic is one of those feelings that is spread by social contagion, as happened during the French Revolution in the period that was called the “[Great Fear](#).”

If a health crisis is compounded by an economic crisis, an uncontrolled wave of panic can trigger the violent impulses of the crowd. The state is then replaced by tribes and gangs, especially in the outskirts of large urban centers. Social war has been theorized by the [São Paulo Forum](#), a conference of Latin American ultra-leftist organizations, and is practiced in Latin America, from Bolivia to Chile, from Venezuela to Ecuador, and may soon expand to Europe.

Someone might observe that this process corresponds to the project of the globalist lobbies, the “masters of chaos,” as Professor Renato Cristin defines them in [his excellent book](#). But if this is true, it is also true that what emerges defeated from this crisis is the utopia of globalization, presented as the great road, destined to lead to the unification of the human race.

Globalization actually destroys space and pulverizes distances: today the key to escaping the epidemic is social distance, the isolation of the individual. The quarantine is diametrically opposed to the "open society" hoped for by [George Soros](#). The conception of man as a relationship, typical of a certain school of philosophical personalism, dissipates.

Pope Francis, after the failure of *Querida Amazonia*, focused heavily on the conference dedicated to the "global compact," scheduled at the Vatican for this coming May 14. This conference however has been rescheduled and has become more distant, not only in time but in its ideological presuppositions.

The Coronavirus brings us back to reality. It is not the end of borders that was announced after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Instead, it is the end of the world without borders, the end of the "global village." It is not the triumph of the new world order: it is the triumph of the new world disorder. The political and social scenario is that of a society that is disintegrating and decomposing. Is it all organized? It's possible. But history is not a deterministic succession of events.

The master of history is God, not the masters of chaos. The killer of globalization is a global virus called the Coronavirus.

## **As An Historian**

At this point, the historian will step in to replace the political observer, seeking to see things from the perspective of a greater chronological distance. Epidemics have accompanied the history of humanity from the very beginning, and all the way to the twentieth century. And they are always intertwined with two other scourges: Wars and economic crises.

The last great epidemic, the [Spanish Flu](#) of 1918, was closely connected to the First World War and the [Great Depression](#) that began in 1929, also known as "[the Great Crash](#)," an economic and financial crisis that convulsed the economic world at the end of the Twenties, with grave repercussions which extended well into the 1930s. These events were followed by the Second World War.

Laura Spinnay is an English scientific journalist who has written a book called [Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How It Changed the World](#). Her book informs us that between 1918 and 1920 the virus which infected approximately 500 million people, including even inhabitants of remote islands of the Pacific

Ocean and of the glacial Arctic Sea, causing the deaths of 50-100 million individuals, ten times more than the First World War.

World War I contributed to the flu's virulence, helping the virus spread throughout the globe. Spinney writes: "It is difficult to imagine a mechanism of contagion more effective than the mobilization of enormous quantities of troops in the height of the autumn wave, who then reached the four corners of the planet where they were greeted by festive crowds.

In essence, what the Spanish flu taught us is that another influenza pandemic is inevitable, but whether it will cause ten million or one hundred million victims depends only on what the world will be like in which it spreads."

In the interconnected world of globalization, the ease with which contagion can spread is certainly greater than it was a century ago. Who can deny it?

But the historian's perspective goes even further back in time. The twentieth century was the most terrible century of history. But there was another terrible century, "The Calamitous Fourteenth Century," as Barbara Tuchman calls it in her book [\*A Distant Mirror\*](#).

I would like to focus on this historical period that marked the end of the Medieval era and the beginning of the Modern era. I do so by basing myself on historical works that are not Catholic but serious and objective in their research.

The [Rogations](#) are processions convoked by the Church in order to implore the help of Heaven against calamities. The Rogations contain the prayer "A fame, peste et bello libera nos, Domine:" – from famine, plague, and war, deliver us, O Lord.

As the historian [Roberto Lopez writes](#), the liturgical invocation present in the Rogation ceremonies "unfolded with all of its drama over the course of the fourteenth century... Between the tenth and twelfth centuries," Lopez continues, "none of the great scourges that mow down humanity seem to have raged in any great measure; neither pestilence, of which there is no mention during this period, nor famine, nor war, which had a greatly reduced number of victims. Moreover, the expanse of agriculture was widened by a slow softening of the climate. We have proof of this in the retreat of the

glaciers in the mountains and of the icebergs in the northern seas, in the extension of wine growing into regions like England where today it is no longer practical, and in the abundance of water in regions of the Sahara that were later reconquered by the desert."

The picture of the fourteenth century was much, much different, as natural catastrophes combined with serious religious and political upheavals.

The fourteenth century was a century of deep religious crisis – it opened in 1303 with the [famous "slap"](#) of Anagni against [Boniface VIII](#), one of the greatest humiliations of the papacy in history. Then, it saw the transference of the papacy for seventy years to the city of Avignon in France (1308-1378). And it ended with forty years of the Western Schism from 1378 to 1417, in which Catholic Europe was divided between two and then three popes. A century later, in 1517, the Protestant Revolution lacerated the unity of the Christian faith.

If the thirteenth century was a period of peace in Europe, the fourteenth century was an era of permanent war. We need only think of the "[Hundred Years' War](#)" between France and England (1339-1452) and of the assault of the Turks against the Byzantine Empire with the conquest of [Adrianople](#) (1362).

In this century Europe experienced an economic crisis due to climatic changes caused, not by man, but by glaciation. The climate of the Middle Ages had been mild and gentle, like that era's customs. But the fourteenth century experienced an abrupt harshening of climatic conditions.

The rains and floods of the spring of 1315 led to a general famine that assailed all of Europe, above all the northern regions, causing the death of millions of people. The famine spread everywhere. The elderly voluntarily refused food, in the hope of enabling the young to survive, and historians of the time write of many cases of cannibalism.

One of the principal consequences of the famines was agricultural de-structuring. In this period there were great movement of agricultural depopulation, characterized by flight from the land and the abandonment of villages; the forest invaded fields and vineyards. As a result of the abandonment of the fields, there was a strong reduction of soil productivity and a depletion of livestock.

If bad weather causes famine, the subsequent weakening of the body of entire populations causes disease. The historians [Ruggiero Romano](#) and [Alberto Tenenti](#) show how in the fourteenth century the recurring cycle of famines and epidemics intensified. The last great plague had erupted between 747 and 750; almost six hundred years later it reappeared, striking four times in the space of a decade.

The plague came from the Orient and arrived in Constantinople in the autumn of 1347. Over the next three years it infected all of Europe, all the way to Scandinavia and Poland. It was the Black Plague, of which [Boccaccio](#) speaks in the [Decameron](#). Italy lost about half of its inhabitants. Agnolo di Tura, the chronicler of Siena, lamented that no one could be found to bury the dead, and that he had to bury his five sons with his own hands. Giovanni Villani, the chronicler of Florence, was struck by the plague in such a sudden way that his chronicle ends abruptly in the middle of a sentence.

The European population that had surpassed 70 million inhabitants at the beginning of the 1300s was reduced by a century of wars, epidemics, and famines to 40 million; it shrank by more than one third. The famines, plague, and wars of the fourteenth century were interpreted by the Christian people as signs of God's chastisement.

[Saint Bernardine of Siena](#) (1380-1444) admonished: *Tria sunt flagella quibus dominus castigat*. There are three scourges with which God chastises: War, plague, and famine. Saint Bernardine belongs to a number of saints, like [Catherine of Siena](#), [Bridget of Sweden](#), [Vincent Ferrer](#), [Louis Marie Grignion de Montfort](#), who warned how throughout history natural disasters have always accompanied the infidelities and apostasy of nations.

It happened at the end of the Christian Middle Ages, and it seems to be happening today. Saints like Bernardine of Siena did not attribute these events to the work of evil agents but to the sins of men, which are even more grave if they are collective sins and still more grave if tolerated or promoted by the rulers of the peoples and by those who govern the Church.

## **As A Philosopher Of History**

These considerations introduce us to the third point in which I will consider the events not as a sociologist or historian but as a philosopher of history.



Theology and the philosophy of history are fields of intellectual speculation that apply the principles of theology and philosophy to historical events.

The theologian of history is like an eagle that judges human affairs from the heights. Some of the great theologians of history were [Saint Augustine](#) (354-430), [Jacques Bénigne Bossuet](#) (1627-1704), who was called the eagle of [Meaux](#), from the name of the diocese where he was bishop, [Count Joseph de Maistre](#) (1753-1821), the marquis [Juan Donoso Cortés](#) (1809-1853), the [abbot of Solesmes Dom Guéranger](#) (1805-1875), professor [Plinio Correa de Oliveira](#) (1908-1995), and many others. There is a Biblical expression that says: *Judicia Dei abyssus multa* (Ps 35:7): the judgments of God are a great abyss. The theologian of history submits himself to these judgments and seeks to understand the reason for them.

[Saint Gregory the Great](#), as he invites us to investigate the reasons for divine action, affirms: "Whoever does not discover the reason for which God does things in the very works themselves, will find in his own meanness and baseness sufficient cause to explain why his investigations are in vain."

Philosophy and modern theology, under the influence above all of Hegel, have replaced the judgments of God with the judgments of history. The principle, according to which the Church judges history, is reversed. It is not the Church that judges history, but history that judges the Church, because the Church, according to the [Nouvelle théologie](#), does not transcend history but is immanent, internal to itself.

When [Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini](#) said in his final interview that "The Church is 200 years behind" with respect to history, he assumed history as the criterion of judgment for the Church. When Pope Francis, in his Christmas greetings to the Roman Curia on December 21, 2019, made these words of Cardinal Martini his own, he is judging the Church in the name of history, overturning what should be the criterion of Catholic judgment.

History in reality is a creature of God, like nature, like all that exists, because nothing of what exists can exist apart from God. All that happens in history is foreseen, regulated and ordered by God for all eternity.

Thus, for the philosopher of history every discussion can only begin with God and finish with God. God

does not only exist; God is concerned for His creatures, and He rewards or chastises rational creatures according to the merits or faults of each. [\*The Catechism of Saint Pius X\*](#) teaches: "God rewards the good and chastises the wicked because He is infinite justice...."

Justice, theologians explain, is one of the infinite perfections of God. The infinite mercy of God presupposed his infinite justice.

Among Catholics, the concept of justice, like the concept of divine justice, is often removed. And yet the doctrine of the Church teaches the existence of a particular judgment that follows the death of every person, with the immediate reward or punishment of the soul, and of a universal judgment in which all angels and all human beings will be judged for their thoughts, words, actions, and omissions.

The theology of history tells us that God rewards and punishes not only men but also collectivities and social groups: Families, nations, civilizations. But while men have their reward or chastisement, sometimes on earth but always in heaven, nations, which do not have an eternal life, are punished or rewarded only on earth.

God is righteous and rewarding and gives to each what is his due: He not only chastises individual persons, but He also sends tribulations to families, cities, and nations for the sins which they commit. Earthquakes, famines, epidemics, wars, and revolutions have always been considered divine chastisements. As [Father Pedro de Ribadaneira](#) (1527-1611) writes: "wars and plagues, droughts and famines, fires and all other disastrous calamities are chastisement for the sins of entire populations."

On March 5, the bishop of an important diocese, whom I will not name, declared: "One thing is certain: this virus was not sent by God to punish sinful humanity. It is an effect of nature, treating us as a stepmother. But God faces this phenomenon with us and probably will make us understand, in the end, that humanity is one single village."

The Italian bishop does not renounce the myth of the "single village," nor the religion of nature, of the [Pachamama](#) and [Greta Thunberg](#), even if for him the "Great Mother" can become "stepmother." But the bishop above all forcefully rejects the idea that the Coronavirus epidemic or any other collective disaster can be a punishment for humanity. The virus, the bishop believes, is only the effect of nature.

But who is it that has created, ordered, and guided nature? God is the author of nature with its forces and its laws, and He has the power to arrange the mechanism of the forces and laws of nature in such a way as to produce a phenomenon according to the needs of His justice or His mercy. God, who is the first cause above all of all that exists, always makes use of secondary causes in order to affect His plans. Whoever has a supernatural spirit does not stop at the superficial level of things, but seeks to understand the hidden design of God that is at work beneath the apparently blind force of nature.

The great sin of our time is the loss of faith by the men of the Church: Not of this or that man of the Church but of the men of the Church in their collective whole, with few exceptions, thanks to whom the Church does not lose her invisibility. This sin produces blindness of the mind and hardening of the heart: Indifference to the violation of the divine order of the universe.

It is an indifference that hides hatred towards God. How is it manifested? Not directly. These men of the Church are too cowardly to directly challenge God; they prefer to express their hatred towards those who dare to speak of God. Whoever dares to speak of the chastisement of God gets stoned: A torrent of hatred flows against him.

These men of the Church, while verbally professing to believe in God, actually live immersed in practical atheism. They despoil God of all His attributes, reducing Him to pure "being" – that is, to nothing. Everything that happens is, for them, the fruit of nature, emancipated from its author, and only science, not the Church, is capable of deciphering nature's laws.

Yet not only sound theology but the *sensus fidei* itself teaches that all physical and material evils that do not come from the will of man depend on the will of God. Saint Alphonsus Liguori writes: "Everything that happens here against our will, know that it does not occur except by the will of God, as Saint Augustine says."

On July 19 the Church's liturgy recalls [Saint Lupus](#) (or Saint Loup), bishop of Troyes (383-478). He was the brother of [Saint Vincent of Lerins](#) and the brother-in-law of [Saint Hilary of Arles](#), belonging to a family of ancient senatorial nobility, but above all of great sanctity.

During his lengthy episcopate (52 years), Gaul was invaded by the Huns. [Attila](#), at the head of an army of 400.000 men, crossed the Rhine, devastating everything he found in his path. When he arrived before

the city of Troyes, Bishop Lupus, in his pontifical vestments and following his clergy in procession, came to meet Attila and asked him, "Who are you that you threaten this city?" And the response came: "Don't you know who I am? I am Attila, king of the Huns, called the scourge of God." To which Lupus replied: "Well, then, be the welcome scourge of God, because we merit divine scourges because of our sins. But if it is possible, let your blows fall only on my person and not on the entire city."

The Huns entered the city of [Troyes](#), but by divine will they were blinded and crossed it without being aware of it and without doing evil to anyone.

The bishops today not only are not speaking about divine scourges, but they are not even inviting the faithful to pray that God will liberate them from the epidemic. There is a coherence in this. Whoever prays, in fact, asks God to intervene in his life, and thus in the things of the world, in order to be protected from evil and to obtain spiritual and material goods. But why should God listen to our prayers, if He is disinterested in the universe created by Him?

If, on the contrary, God can, by means of miracles, change the laws of nature, avoiding the sufferings and death of an individual man, or great loss of life throughout an entire city, He can also decree the punishment of a city or a people, because their collective sins call down collective chastisements.

[Saint Charles Borromeo](#) said, "Because of our sins, God permitted the fire of the plague to attack every part of Milan." And Saint Thomas Aquinas explains: "When it is all the people who sin, vengeance must be made on all the people, just as the Egyptians who persecuted the children of Israel were submerged in the Red Sea, and as the inhabitants of Sodom were struck down en masse, or a significant number of people must be struck, such as happened in the chastisement inflicted for the adoration of the golden calf."

On the eve of the second session of the First Vatican Council, on January 6, 1870, [Saint John Bosco](#) had a vision in which it was revealed to him that "war, plague, and famine are the scourges with which the pride and malice of men will be struck down." This is how the Lord expressed himself: "You, O priests, why do you not run to weep between the vestibule and the altar, begging for the end of the scourges? Why do you not take up the shield of faith and go over the roofs, in the houses, in the streets, in the piazzas, in every inaccessible place, to carry the seed of my word. Do you not know that this is the terrible two-edged sword that strikes down my enemies and that breaks the wrath of God and men?"

The priests are silent, the bishops are silent, the Pope is silent.

We are approaching Holy Week and Easter. And yet for the first time in many centuries in Italy, the churches are closed, Masses are suspended, and even Saint Peter's Basilica is closed. The Holy Week and Easter liturgies *urbe et orbi* will not be drawing pilgrims from all over the world.

God, also punishes by "subtraction," as Saint Bernardine of Siena says; and today it seems like He has removed the churches, the Mother of all churches from the supreme Pastor, while the Catholic people are groping confused in the dark, deprived of the light of truth that should illuminate the world from Saint Peter's Basilica. How can we not see in what the Coronavirus is producing a symbolic consequence of the self-destruction of the Church?

*Judicia Dei abyssus multa*. We ought to be certain that what is happening does not prefigure the success of the sons of darkness, but rather their defeat, because, as [Father Carlo Ambrogio Cattaneo, S.J.](#), (1645-1705) explains, the number of sins, whether of a man or of a people, is numbered. *Venit dies iniquitate prae finita*, says the prophet Ezekiel (21:2), God is merciful but there is a final sin that God does not tolerate and that provokes His chastisement.

Furthermore, according to a principle of the theology of Christian history, the center of history is not the enemies of the Church but the saints. *Omnia sustineo propter electos* (2 Tim 2:10) says Saint Paul. History revolves around the elect of God. And history depends on the impenetrable designs of Divine Providence.

Throughout history there are those who oppose the law of God, whether men, groups, or organized societies, both public and secret, who work to destroy all that has been ordained by God. They are able to obtain apparent successes, but they will always ultimately be defeated.

The scenario we have before us is apocalyptic, but Pius XII recalls that in the Book of Revelation (6:2) Saint John says, "did not behold only the ruins caused by sin, war, famine, and death; he also saw in the first place the victory of Christ. And, indeed, the path of the Church throughout the centuries is a *via crucis*, but it is also always a march of triumph. The Church of Christ, the man of faith and Christian love, are always those who bring light, redemption and peace to a humanity without hope. *Iesus Christus heri et hodie, ipse et in saecula* (Hebrews 13:8). Christ is your guide, from victory to victory. Follow him."

At Fatima, the Blessed Mother has revealed to us the scenario of our time, and she assured us of her triumph. With the humility of those who are aware that they can do nothing by their own strength, but also with the confidence of those who know that everything is possible with the help of God, we do not retreat, and we entrust ourselves to Mary, at the tragic hour of the events foretold by the message of Fatima.

*This article is a [transcription of a video](#) made by Professor de Mattei.*

*The [image](#) shows "The Plague of the Philistines at Ashdod," by Pieter van Halen, painted in 1661.*

