

Facing Reality, Dealing with Denial

How Should We Respond to the New Coronavirus, Covid-19?

by Father Emmanuel Kahn and Archpriest Gregory Hallam

“Humankind cannot bear very much reality.”

(T.S. Eliot, Four Quartets)

The challenge of 2020 has become self-isolation in the face of the new coronavirus, Covid-19. Evidence suggests that the virus began in a bat in an animal market in Wuhan, China and was transmitted by a bat to an unknown animal (possibly an anteater) and then on to humans. It has now become an escalating threat to everyone. The World Health Organization (WHO) has informed us that there are now 300,000 known cases of this illness in the world: “While it took 67 days from the first reported case to reach the first 100,000 cases of the disease caused by the coronavirus, it took only 11 days for the second 100,000 cases, and just four days for the third 100,000 cases.”¹ However, a disturbing number of us are in denial of this threat to humanity. Why? How can we best face the temptation of denial in the context of Covid-19?

¹ [Note: To view any web reference, use Ctrl + Click to follow link.] See https://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2020/03/23/sports/olympics/23reuters-health-coronavirus-who.html?campaign_id=51&emc=edit_MBE_p_20200324&instance_id=17019&nl=morning-briefing®i_id=56165882§ion=topNews&segment_id=22689&te=1&user_id=f20105458ccacc1645c5682fad49c2cb

[Note: Those seeking immediate advice on how to confront the pandemic might find it helpful to read now the weblinks in footnotes 4, 10, 11, 14, 18 and 21.]

Understanding Denial Psychology

Denial psychology has been defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as “a defence mechanism in which confrontation with a personal problem or with reality is avoided by denying the existence of the problem or reality.” This refusal to acknowledge something can be either at a subconscious or conscious level, often linked to what Chambers 21st Century Dictionary calls fear “of an emotion or truth that is particularly painful or difficult to come to terms with.” At different times in our lives, we each choose initially to deny certain problems and certain aspects of reality, but we can then change that choice to tackle the personal problem or threat to our present environment. How can we change ourselves and help others to change?

It is important to stop feeling guilty about being in denial. The renowned Mayo Clinic in the USA suggests that “initial short-term denial can be a good thing, giving you time to adjust to a painful or stressful issue. It might also be a precursor to making some sort of change in your life.... You can be in denial about anything that makes you feel vulnerable or threatens your sense of control ... [such as] you won’t acknowledge a difficult situation [or] try not to face the facts of a problem [or] downplay possible consequences of the issue.... [However,] staying in denial can interfere with ... your ability to tackle change.”²

²<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/denial/art20047926>.

In a sense, if we are in denial we choose to wear masks with thin eye slots that limit our vision and obscure our ability to see a particular problem or aspect of reality. Often, we choose to wear those masks for many years and then pay serious consequences. Yet, facts keep arising that pose problems when we wear masks. It has been said: “If there are no facts, there can be no truth. If there is no truth, there can be no trust. If there is no trust, there can be no democracy.” So, how can we grow stronger in our respect for facts, truth, trust and democracy?

An Action Plan to Confront Pandemic Denial

Therese J. Borchard has suggested an action plan to deal with denial.³ She proposes starting with four steps: (1) Educate yourself; (2) Gather the information; (3) Make a plan; and (4) State the facts. This is the comprehensive approach now being followed by the United Kingdom Government who ordered us on 24th March to stay at home, except for essential purposes.⁴

³ See <https://psychcentral.com/blog/11-ways-to-help-a-loved-one-in-denial/> Her approach focuses on personal problems, rather than environmental realities. However, the action plan is helpful with its first four steps.

⁴ See the video of the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson’s address at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-52012432> . The full text is at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-52011928> . These doctors and nurses strongly support his advice: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-northern-ireland-51999437/stay-at-home-doctors-and-nurses-appeal-to-uk> . So does Dr. Jerome Adams, the U.S. Surgeon-General: <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/surgeon-general-has-coronavirus-warning-week-it-s-going-get-n1166421>

(1) Educate Yourself

On March 11th the World Health Organization declared that the new coronavirus, now named Covid-19, is a pandemic. The Director-General of WHO, Dr. Tedros Adhan Ghebreyesus, has spoken of how “we are deeply concerned both by the alarming levels of spread and severity and by the alarming levels of inaction.” He pointed out the danger of both “unreasonable fear” and “unjustified acceptance that the fight is over.” Governments had “to strike a fine balance between protecting health, minimising disruption and respecting human rights.” Dr. Ghebreyesus expressed the conviction that “we’re in this together to do the right thing with calm and to protect the citizens of the world. It’s doable.”

The seriousness of the situation was caught by Chancellor Angela Merkel’s warning to the German people that up to 70% of the population—some 55 million people could contract this coronavirus. Some German virologists dispute such a high estimate, but of greater concern is that one survey indicated that some 60% to 70% of the German people are not yet worried about the virus, nor do they think they will be infected. It is this level of complacency that rightly concerns Dr. Ghebreyesus.

(2) Gather the information

A recent article in the New York Times by Benedict Carey was titled “Complacency, Not Panic, Is the Real Danger.”⁵ The danger is that

⁵ “The research suggests, in effect that if you let people decide for themselves how to react, you’ll get two problematic trends: a majority taking progressively more risks with time, and a small minority exhibiting panic-like behaviors, buying

“people will self-isolate for a time and then, when nothing happens [and] they don’t get sick, they’ll begin to go out again—taking more risks than they had planned.” This is precisely why the British Government delayed for several weeks before closing pubs, cafes, restaurants, theatres, athletic venues and schools (except for approximately 10% of children whose parents are key workers).⁶ Now, the Government has ordered a virtual lockdown, with no more than two people to meet at any one time outside of home; and they are prepared to enforce this draconian order.⁷

Earlier, the British Government was following sound scientific advice in a fast-moving situation. Now, the governments of both the United Kingdom and the United States have been influenced by a report from Imperial College, London, setting out the threat posed by this virus.⁸ The computer modelling in this report strongly supported Dr. Ghebreyesus’s firm advice that: “The idea that countries should shift from containment to mitigation is wrong and dangerous. You can’t fight a virus if you don’t know where it is. That means robust surveillance to find, isolate, test and treat every case, to break the chains of transmission. And to do that, you must test and isolate. You cannot fight

out supplies.” See <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/19/health/coronavirus-panic-anxiety.html?action=click&module=moreIn&pgtype=Article®ion=Footer>.

⁶ See the earlier video of the Press Conference of 21st March led by the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, including a speech from the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Ravi Sunak, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KvLWihEZnfM&t=6s>

⁷ See footnote 4.

⁸ Alternate timelines are presented for the spread of the virus in the United Kingdom and the USA based on computer modelling. The two graphs on timing are especially important. See <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/16/us/coronavirus-fatality-rate-white-house.html?action=click&module=Spotlight&pgtype=Homepage> There is a link in this article to the full 20-page report. Note the modelling is dynamic and the predictions will shift as more data is gathered from disease hotspots.

a fire blindfolded. And we cannot stop this pandemic if we don't know who is infected." It is not at all clear what is the best way to stop the chains of transmission in many different countries. The best case outcome and the worst case outcome remain possibilities for any country in the world.⁹

(3) Make a plan

Everyone agrees that hand washing often and carefully for 20 seconds with soap and hot water is essential. There is also a mounting consensus that self-isolation is going to be necessary not only for the elderly and for those with pre-existing health conditions, but for the vast majority of us.¹⁰ For those of us who do need to go out, major precautions will be necessary.¹¹ Much remains unknown about this virus, so any plan will need to be subject to sudden changes. The vast majority of those who become infected with the virus will have only mild (if any) symptoms. However, at a conference last month of epidemiological experts from around the world, convened by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and

⁹ See the column by Nicholas Kristoff in the *New York Times* of March 20th on the best and worst possible scenarios for the USA over the next year at:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/20/opinion/sunday/coronavirus-outcomes.html> and the article by Kim Hjelgaard in *USA Today* of March 20th on which countries are doing the best and worst jobs of fighting the coronavirus at: <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2020/03/17/coronavirus-how-countries-across-globe-responding-covid-19/5065867002/> .

¹⁰ See the helpful one-minute videos from the BBC on hand-washing at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/health-51754472/coronavirus-how-to-wash-your-hands-in-20-seconds>) and on self-isolation at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p084yhfx> . For further advice on long-term self-isolation see the suggestions from the retired NASA astronaut, Scott Kelly, at: https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/21/opinion/scott-kelly-coronavirus-isolation.html?algo=top_conversion&fallback=false&imp_id=133984963&imp_id=3781907&action=click&module=trending&pgtype=Article®ion=Footer

¹¹ See the article by Jill Cowan, "What to know before going to the grocery store" at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/18/us/coronavirus-grocery-shopping.html>

Prevention (CDCP), it was estimated that for those experiencing symptoms the hospitalization rate will be between 3% to 12%, while some 0.25% to 1% will die.¹²

The culture of every country and group is different.¹³ We are each unique persons with our own hopes and fears.¹⁴ However, we can each develop a mindset in which we tackle difficult situations such as the continuing spread of the Covid-19 virus with “purposeful engagement” and a “growth mindset” in which we adapt to changing challenges “through application and experience.”¹⁵ Of course, we are all mortal, as Atul Gawande has reflected in insightful prose, and as Philip Larkin phrased it in his poem, “Ambulances”: “They come to rest at any kerb: All streets in time are visited.”¹⁶ It remains an open question how the present pandemic will conclude, with different answers for different people and different groups and different countries. Much will depend upon identifying effective drugs (if any) and developing and mass-producing an effective vaccine as soon as possible.¹⁷

¹² See Sheri Fink, “Worst-Case Estimates for U.S. Coronavirus Deaths, *New York Times*, 13 March 2020 at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/13/us/coronavirus-deaths-estimate.html>. For up-to-date estimates see the freely available articles from *The Lancet* and the *New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM)*.

¹³ See Daniel Coyle, *The Culture Code: The Secrets of Highly Successful Groups* (New York: Bantam Books, 2018).

¹⁴ On confronting fear and anxiety, see the advice from Dr. Judson Brewer on the Chris Chatterjee podcast at: <https://drchatterjee.com/coronavirus-special-how-to-manage-anxiety-in-the-face-of-a-global-pandemic/>.

¹⁵ See Carol S. Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success: How We Can Learn to Fulfill Our Potential* (New York: Ballentine Books, 2006), pp. 4, 6.

¹⁶ Atul Gawande, *Being Mortal: Illness, Medicine, and What Matters in the End* (London: Profile Books, 2014 and Welcome Collection, 2015). Larkin’s poem is cited in the foreword

¹⁷ See the website of Clinical Trials Arena, especially the article on 20th March 2020 by Praveen Duddu, “Coronavirus treatment: Vaccines/Drugs in the pipeline for COVID-19” at: <https://www.clinicaltrialsarena.com/analysis/coronavirus-mers-cov-drugs/>

There may well be a continuing movement from complacency to fear and possible panic. However, fear can give way to a self-awareness in which we each choose whether to be selfish or to be altruistic—whether to be concerned solely about ourselves or to seek to help others. The difficult and dangerous situation in Wuhan, China is being resolved in part by a combination of medical expertise and a willingness to help others, in the midst of a society locked down by authoritarian government. Other societies will choose different paths, but the personal conflict within each of us between selfishness and altruism is universal. In both the UK and USA, charities have seen a drop-off in donations over the past month, and this is particularly worrying for local food banks and international development agencies that support some of our most vulnerable brothers and sisters. The courage and wisdom of a married couple in Wuhan—a filmmaker and an emergency nurse—indicate a path that can apply to all of us.¹⁸

(4) State the facts

Victor Frankl, author of *Man's Search for Meaning* has pointed out that: “When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.”¹⁹ Precisely how we will each change ourselves is not yet clear. Considerable negotiation and personal trust will be essential. In a sense, the whole world is being held hostage to this virus. That is why the experience and advice of a former FBI hostage negotiator, Chris Voss, is so helpful in *Never Split the Difference*:

¹⁸ See the beautiful 10-minute video of what happened on the streets and homes and hospitals of Wuhan as the pandemic grew at:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-asia-china-51858226/coronavirus-life-inside-china-s-lockdown> .

¹⁹ Cited in the foreword of Immaculée Ilibagiza with Steve Erwin, *Left to Tell: One Woman's Story of Surviving the Rwandan Genocide* (London: Hay House, 2014).

*Negotiating as if your life depended on it.*²⁰ We must all become hostage negotiators seeking a path to both personal and collective public health and economic security.²¹

The suggestions of Therese Borchard about how to deal with personal “disorders” that are “clearly wreaking havoc” in someone’s home life, friendships and job can be applied to the worldwide havoc now being caused by Covid-19: “You start with the facts, and depending on how the conversation is going, you end with the facts.” Facts can be disputed. However, “they have no emotion or judgment or attitude attached to them. And they are especially heard when spoken from a person who has done her homework.”²² It is appropriate then that we should all do our “homework” about this virus and resolve how we are going to face it for many months, probably for the next year and possibly for years, but hopefully with efficacious drugs and vaccines.

Conclusion: The Unity of Science, Medicine and Faith

It would be a serious mistake to think that all the different possible outcomes for this pandemic will be resolved solely by human ingenuity and effort. Yes, many of us will move through the stages of “denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.”²³ Yes, we should “do our homework” and move from minimal knowledge to increasing

²⁰ Chris Voss with Tahl Raz, *Never Split the Difference: Negotiating as if your life depended on it* (London: Penguin/Random House, 2016).

²¹ See the leader in *The Economist* of March 21st-27th 2020, titled “Closed,” free at: <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2020/03/19/paying-to-stop-the-pandemic?cid1=cust/ednew/n/bl/n/2020/03/19n/owned/n/n/nwl/n/n/UK/431492/n> . The double challenge of how to respond to a health crisis and an economic crisis is considered at:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/23/opinion/coronavirus-depression.html> .

²² See footnote 2 above.

²³ See Melody Beattie, *Denial* (Center City, MN: Hazelden, 1986), pp. 8-12.

understanding to growing wisdom. Yes, we can rely on science and medicine to seek solutions to public and personal health. However, prayer is also essential. Those of us with a firm belief that God created the world and in the power of God to change us and change the lives of others are often timid in expressing that belief. Yet 84% of the world's population belong to a religious group; and “the world is getting more religious, not less [with] Christians form[ing] the biggest religious group by some margin, with 2.3 billion adherents or 31.2% of the total world population of 7.3 billion.”²⁴ Therefore, it is highly appropriate that many of us should join Sister Silouana, an Orthodox nun, who has asked us to pray every evening from 10 pm to 10:15 pm (United Kingdom time): “Lord Jesus Christ, save your world.”²⁵

- Father Emmanuel is Assistant Priest at St. Aidan's Antiochian Orthodox Church, Manchester, UK and Archpriest Gregory is Parish Priest of St Aidan's and an administrator of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of the British Isles and Ireland.
- *Note: Father Emmanuel is a medical writer with a PhD in Education who has written extensively on “One Health” issues—how human, animal and environmental health influence each other.*

²⁴ See the research by the Pew Research Centre on 5 April 2017 at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/05/christians-remain-worlds-largest-religious-group-but-they-are-declining-in-europe/> as cited by *The Guardian* of 27 August 2018 at: <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/aug/27/religion-why-is-faith-growing-and-what-happens-next> from which the quotations are taken.

²⁵ See Sister Silouana at: <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/nunsilouana/> .