

Interview: Archbishop Makarios of Australia with journalist Maria Giahnaki for orthodoxianewsagency.gr



1. Firstly can you comment on the Coronavirus pandemic? Is it true that humankind is experiencing a global biological war?

The studies that have been presented to date show that this virus has arisen through mutation. Without wanting to fall into the trap of catastrophic discourse and accepting the 'prophecies' that are on the rise these days, I acknowledge medically that this virus has existed since 2002. The coronaviruses are a group of viruses which attack the respiratory system of humans and animals. This specific virus (COVID-19) is the seventh in this family. In 2002, as was previously mentioned, we saw the emergence of the corona virus SARS in China, while in 2012 we saw the emergence of corona virus MERS in the Middle East.

Beyond the scientific facts, it is well known that the second most powerful nation in the world is China, while America, which is the first, has a huge debt to China. The

balances between power are always very delicate. I foresee that the vaccine to treat and cure this virus will be discovered in the USA since in this way the existing economic balances which have been threatened will be maintained. Moreover, we experienced similar situations in the past where there were outbreaks of even more deadly viruses, but we did not see such global mobilization. This specific outbreak has resulted in an only 1% death rate for those of the population who have been infected. All these are fact which one is not able to ignore too easily; indeed, they indicate that certain agendas may underlie the kind of response that has eventuated with the appearance of this virus (which, according to research into its cause, has not been manufactured by humans). This is, therefore, not a biological weapon since the illness does not clinically present as such. It is not a weapon of mass destruction which has a toxic character and which has been let loose into the atmosphere to generate mass murder. It is a pandemic which we must all face with unity, faith, obedience to the governing bodies and the scientific community, and with prudence and sobriety.

2. What measures have you taken in Australia?

Here in Australia we have tried, as much as possible, to maintain the legal requirements as well as the advice of the medical bodies, not because we want to protect ourselves but to protect those around us. Let us not forget that illnesses are personal trials as well as trials faced by our loved ones and their respective families. We do not for a moment wish to imagine that entire families will suffer. The only reason as to why we were forced to close all our Churches nation-wide, through an official encyclical to our people, was to protect our neighbor, families and society more broadly. We certainly do not want our Churches to become a source of contamination for anyone. We do not want our participation in the Divine Liturgy and other communal worship services to result in anyone becoming ill or even dying because they become infected. Certainly, all the services are being conducted by the priest and the chanter. The bells continue to ring. The services are being live streamed through the internet. People know that their priest is there, and that he continues to offer the bloodless sacrifice for the health of all people; for all those who are not in the Church, and for the repose of all those who have departed this life.

3. Many people are asking why God allowed such a trial to take place across the whole planet. It is a similar question as the one relating to pain and suffering which humanity faces from time to time. Why is it that the God of mercy and love allows such situations?

I will not attempt to give an answer to such questions because then we will become embroiled in a process of rationalizing what is mystery and faith. I can, however, assure you that our Church is not a Church of pain and illness. It is a Church of joy, love, victory over death. Pain and suffering become an opportunity for the Christian to become a better person, to come out of himself, his introversion and self-love. Pain gives us the ability to empathize with the pain of our fellow human beings, and to enter their situation for a while. Pain allows us to rethink and reflect on our way of life, which may be entirely worldly, and which may not leave any room for a spiritual and eschatological outlook. Pain and illness usually soften the intensity of the passions and transform the person.

Of course, there is the other possibility that illness and pain harden people, making them more unyielding and more difficult. Satan exploits illness a lot. If we do not mobilize patience and our trust in God, then we become anxious, we protest and do not accept our illness, and then Satan creates havoc and one illness follows the other. Some people turn to faith thinking they will overcome illness in that way. I don't know, however, if this is what we should be striving for. Faith in God has nothing to do with a transaction. Others think that faith protects us from pain, but this is not true. Faith simply helps us to understand and to accept God's silence when we are tormented by the question you asked me initially: Why does God allow pain and pandemics? Why does He allow the coronavirus and death? Why does God send cancer to me?

4. How should a Christian generally face illnesses?

When we speak about illness we need to clarify that we may be referring to a state that cannot always be explained medically and scientifically. Our body, for example, can slowly die when the soul is not alive; in other words, the presentation of bodily malaise or fatigue is often a result of one's spiritual state and not merely one's biological. Some people know that they are ill, while others do not know it. Some accept it and some do not. A person may be living with a particular illness, but follows a completely different path; in other words that person may not be accepting of his or her reality. This is because people are free to live according to the flesh or to live according to the spirit. They may live with God, but quickly they may learn to live without God, without light, without love.

It is natural to have troubling thoughts and to be worried with the appearance of this pandemic. Despite being human, let us not show a human way of thinking and lack of courage. Illness and trials in life more generally become a criterion by which our spirituality and the depth of our humanity can be tested. Hyper-anxiety, panic and fear reveal the absence of a spiritual life. That is why we are called to face

every illness as children of God and not as worldly people. In this spirit, I am not sure whether we should be trying to overcome our illnesses or accept them as a necessary element of our salvation.

Of course, in this situation, the reality is different. As was previously highlighted, we are not concerned for our protection but rather the protection of our neighbor, who is foundational for the spiritual life.

5. Can you give our readers a message on the problems of our times generally and especially in relation to the Coronavirus pandemic?

During times of pandemics, trials and sorrows, let us think how close God and the Saints are to us. Let us look at the lives of the Saints of our Church. They all suffered pain, affliction, deprivation and sorrow; they all experienced difficulties and innumerable trials. In the writings of the Great Fathers, it is repeatedly emphasized how pain and illness sanctify the human person. There has never been a Saint who wrote negatively about pain and illness. Our Saints may have performed miracles, but they never cured themselves. On the contrary, they boast about their trials because in these they were led closer to God.

Illnesses and difficulties will come into our lives. Sometimes they will come unexpectedly. Let us not think that we are not able to overcome them, because then we will be burdened with anxiety and fear. Rather, let us confront these naturally. Let us walk completely free from compulsions and desires, because for us Christians, “whether we live, or whether we die we belong to God”. Let us give thanks to God, not for our illnesses or for the cures, but because, through these, we came to know Him better and we become more intimately connected with Him. Let us look forward to the abolition of our limitations. This means that we put an end to any obstacle, and we become one with Him. We then reach the state that St Paul was referring to: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”

This new pandemic that we are experiencing today comes to show us, once again, human fragility and our fear when faced with the possibility of death. The human person, however, has been created for something else; and not for corruption and anxiety. For this reason, I personally ask that people remain calm. Let us place our trust in God. I know it is not easy to abandon yourself to the mercy of God. But life always has a way of moving through and beyond trials and difficulties. Our faith in God is a huge power, implacable and unrestrained. Let us therefore make use of it. Let us enhance the power of our faith because then we will see everything in a different light, which will no longer tie us down to earth, but will direct us towards Heaven.

This pandemic will be overcome. The Resurrection will come soon.
