



## **BEHIND THE MASK: MEDITATION ON REDISCOVERING PERSONHOOD DURING THE PANDEMIC**

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**Abstract :** This essay tries to answer the question “who is the person behind the mask?” by analyzing the most relevant cultural, political and religious aspects of mask-usage from a Christian perspective in preparation for the post-pandemic reality. The short review of the Greek and Christian cultural heritage concerning masks is followed by a critical phenomenological analysis on some effects of the current pandemic that accelerated the social and cultural processes already lurking underneath the surface. I will discuss six dimensions in which obligatory mask usage has transformed social relations: the notion of health based on separation, the body as a suspicious entity, the new division between private and public, the virtualisation of relationships, other-perception and finally, mask usage as a symbol of solidarity. Pleading for the use of charitable imagination in order to rediscover the person behind the mask, I argue for a tradition-based resistance against impersonal, virtualized and disembodied relations in the Covid-era.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

A whole new world has emerged since humanity was struck by the Covia-19 pandemic. The current worrisome global situation poses new intellectual challenges, one of which is that we consider ourselves as well as others to be potential health threats. Here I would like to address a question that arises often in our Covid-era, socially-reorganized life, one that has

philosophical depth and implications: *Who is the person behind the mask?*

In addition to being a medical and social issue, wearing masks is also a complex cultural phenomena, the understanding of which requires us to illuminate its specific and very rich religious-cultural context. Therefore, in the following short meditation on "masked

personhood", we will briefly review the Greek and Christian cultural heritage concerning masks before offering a critical phenomenological analysis on the different aspects of mask-wearing during the pandemic. In conclusion, I will argue for the use of charitable imagination to rediscover the person behind the mask and for a tradition-based resistance against impersonal, virtualized and disembodied relations in the post-pandemic world

### ANCIENT MASK - INVOLVEMENT IN THE DRAMA

When reflecting upon whether the mask actually hides or reveals our true nature as subjects to be unmasked, the allusion to Greek cultural heritage concerning the relation between mask and person cannot go unnoticed.<sup>1</sup> As it is widely known, the English word "person" stems from the masks that were used in ancient Greek dramatic performances. In this context, wearing a mask was not so much meant to hide but rather to express one's participation in an event that concerned the well-being of the entire polis, not just of the individual.

Keeping in mind the tragic contours of the current pandemic, let us recall that, according to Aristotle in Poetics chapter XI, the dramatic events the personage with the mask had to go through included the sudden realization or recognition of his situation in the world, his character flaws, and so on.<sup>2</sup> It was this turning point that supposedly caused the purification of heart in those who witnessed it.<sup>3</sup>

The mask was thus a shining sign that helped to place the focus on the "personage" and the role they played in the drama, which concerned everyone because it contained a universal truth that was meant to be both displayed and realized by the community.

### MASKS AND ABSOLUTE REVELATION

In the Western world, the concept of the person radically transformed over the centuries due to the theological, philosophical and cultural reception of Christian revelation. Consequently, the meaning of masks-wearing - hiding one's face in a literal and figurative sense - gained radically new connotations as well.

The Christian theological understanding of the human person as *imago Dei* implies not only a different ontology, with special respect to the idea of participation, but also arguably offers a more thorough account of the divine-human relationship than the Greek drama. The Christian interpretation of drama has a wider amplitude (God is more divine, man is more human), encompasses more than the polis itself (as it is extended to all of humanity), and has a more radical turning point than the Aristotelian idea of "catharsis": it implies a complete conversion, which is directed toward the *theosis*<sup>4</sup> of the human person.

In the works of Homer and in ancient Greek dramas, gods as well as their messengers could be hidden behind the mask; they could be personified and intervene in human affairs. According to the Christian faith, however, Jesus Christ is the "unmasked" incarnation of the divine. His human face, uncovered divinity brought down to earth, reveals the complex inter-Trinitarian relations that encompass the divine-human drama from beginning to end.

Through the Christian event and its corresponding theological interpretations (both so definitive for Western cultural development), the human person - and especially the face - became the most eloquent expression of human participation in the divine-human drama.

In other words, the unmasked divinity of Jesus Christ, with its incomparable promise of *theosis*, reframed the whole religious and cultural

dialectic- The divine face that became humanly accessible in Jesus transformed the interplay between hiding and revealing oneself, firstly by marking an absolute measure and source (divinity), and secondly by defining self-revelation as a personal act of love.

According to Christian understanding, the absolute revelation of the divine and the human person are essentially intertwined; masks and masquerades become enriched by a still-unknown meaning due to their (intended or unintended) relationship to the Christian event. Each and every human being already wears a divine mask (*the imago Dei*) in a positive, revelatory sense; thus, through Christ, the new Adam, everybody is entitled to enter the stage of world history (understood here as the history of the divine-human collaboration).

Therefore, one can put away all masks that limit one's role in this universal dramatic play while seeing titles, histories, differing origins, communities, languages and personal relations not only as tremendously important but also as *divinely relevant*. Moreover, each event of human life, including the seemingly insignificant or invisible, enters into this co-authored divine-human story that encompasses all from beginning to end.

In order to better understand the specific paradox of the drama that defines all human interactions related to masking and unmasking oneself, let us recall that its climax is the unmasked "Ecce Homo": Jesus on the Cross is the *divine mask* in which the invisible becomes visible. According to Catholic theology, the glory of God is revealed in Christ dying on the Cross: the lowest point of human existence where the Incarnate Son of God dies as a criminal, which, when freely accepted as the will of God, coincides with the highest point of divine self-revelation. Christ, the very form of love through which the divine becomes visible,

transforms the whole *dialectic of revealing and concealing oneself* that is present in all human interactions, culture, expressions and *dimensions of life*. This dialectic is reinterpreted in relation to a new unity stemming from and crowned by the celebration of the divine within the community of the Church)<sup>4</sup>.

In other civilizations, veiling the human face is often interpreted as an act of reverence. Although in some form it is still present in the Western world (blusher veils for wedding ceremonies, for example), in this cultural context the human face is regarded as the most powerful expression of a person's unique dignity. Even the most anti-traditional postmodern accounts of human nature, which usually focus on the *right of self-expression rather than the human being's unique ontological status*, must recognize that the human countenance has an expressive power incomparable with any other natural entity. By acknowledging this unique feature even in secular approaches to anthropology, we will find reminiscences on deciphering the face's meaning along the lines of the imago-principle and, ultimately speaking, divine self-revelation<sup>7</sup>.

Besides some failed attempts by new atheist thinkers, human expressions have hardly ever been separated from mythical and religious beliefs. However, even these accounts barely question the transcendence of bodily expressiveness; they would only interpret it along the lines of human self-aggrandizement and, ultimately speaking, self-divinization.

Rather than an ideological misinterpretation, the transcendence of facial expressions requires a phenomenological description. We could start with the observation that different forms of self-revelation have something truly artistic at their root. One could say that any expression is born from the marriage of heaven and earth; it is the self-expression of a human nature called

to go beyond itself. It is in this sense that communicative bodily motions (and especially facial expressions - even the most trivial glances reveal something about the deep mystery of who a person truly is by providing insights into the infinite realm of consciousness. The vast richness of a person's facial expressions is paradoxical because they are simultaneously unique and universal: The smile of every single person is characteristic to him or her, it cannot be substituted. What is more, each individual act of smiling is singular and unrepeatable - and yet, it is still recognizable as a smile. The uniqueness of that smile makes sense only within its greater context - for example, there is a difference between a fake smirk and a happy grin.

But what does the actual smile mean? What is expressed through it? Our visage is the most expressive part of the body, and yet it needs interpretation. Even though good friends or couples may understand each other by reading signs that could be invisible to someone else, the actual meaning of the expression always remains enigmatic to a point. It is not even fully given to the performer of the expression, for even he or she cannot see it as it appears to others. Thus, we might want to add to the idea that the human soul is infinite and unable to fully know itself by claiming that, even if we were absolutely unmasked, there would still be a mask that could not be taken away, as our bodily and especially facial expressions are never fully transparent - not even to ourselves.

As opposed to any other type of conscious object, the human (or divine) person is not simply there to be observed and studied. The transparency, or better, the revelation of a person depends on one's desire to open oneself to the other, and therefore it is essentially connected to the experience of love. The more one loves, the better one can understand the person - what he or she truly is and is meant to be - despite any flaws, imperfections, shortcomings or vices.

Yet transparency in this type of relationship, when the *unmasked person is in front of loving eyes*, takes us not to the "realm of eschatology" but rather to the everyday *eschatological* hopes of everyone who loves. These hopes entail the rebirth of the given person in order to be fully present and completely reconciled in all of his or her fundamental relations: with the origin of his or her being, with oneself, nature and the other persons. For, whenever one has the courage to remove the "metaphorical mask" by exposing oneself to the love of another, there is a *pre-taste*, an eschatological flavor of the full community that self-giving and self-revealing acts strive towards.

### **MASKING AND UNMASKING**

The impossibility of total transparency in this life creates a dialectic of revealing and concealing oneself, but these acts retain their mystery. Sometimes when all masks are off, the subject becomes more intriguing; at other times, a person's disguise unexpectedly reveals their very center. Despite the certain ambiguity of this dialectic, the removal of the mask remains a distinctively meaningful act that indicates a new level of intimacy within a relationship - and yet, how could we ever increase the intimacy of a relationship if there were no masks, no depth of self-expression or, especially, play of facial language? Particular smiles, laughter and fluttering of the eyelashes are only proper when looking into the eyes of someone close to us.

On the other hand, putting on the mask to make some expressions less personal is equally meaningful and constitutive of human relationships. Just as we have the intimate look that comes from the heart, we have the polite aversion of eye contact and the smile that, available to anyone, means almost nothing. It seems that this internal limiting of the power that lies in facial expressions is just as constitutive for human self-expressions as its

opposite. Although interpersonal communication entails the constant interplay of revealing and/or disguising oneself thereby controlling the dynamics of the relationship), what is controlled is always the degree of openness, the degree of the self-revealing capacity of the human person with all of their emotional variations. The dialectic of hiding and showing oneself is only meaningful within this fundamental ontological framework of self-revelation.

## WEARING MASKS IN TIMES OF A PANDEMIC

In the Western world, obligatory mask-usage during the Covid-19 pandemic irrupted into a post-Christian cultural context<sup>9</sup> very much focused on the democratic norm of transparency<sup>10</sup>, in which wearing a mask is usually interpreted in terms of hiding something, with all its negative connotations. In Western culture, transparency is an indispensable safety for requirement (as illustrated by the long debate on the legal status of *hijab*, for example). Covering one's face was problematic before the current pandemic because of the constant need to identify citizens for safety reasons.

Wearing masks during the pandemic does not change this paradigm; indeed, it barely implies a restructuring of safety preferences: In light of the immediate danger of contagion, health is more highly ranked than fear or terrorism, for example. Although obligatory mask usage in public places does not change the *beau ideal* of Western societies, with the theological-philosophical division between public and private life regulating modern complex socio-cultural implications. The novelty brought about by the pandemic is relative. The world has seen and dealt with pandemics before, including ones that proportionally caused more death than Covid-

19. here, I will interpret some new features of the pandemic in a globalised world in terms of the effects that have accelerated social and cultural processes already lurking underneath the surface. I will discuss six of these aspects from a Christian perspective with the goal of fleshing out the ways obligatory mask usage has transformed social relations.

### 1. SICKNESS-INDUCED SEPARATION

Amidst the obvious political disorientation when the world was confronted with Covid-19, virology took over and dictated the measures to be taken. Psychological and sociological considerations were often completely left aside under the defense of following the logic of virology with the goal of saving millions of lives. While both progressive and conservative political forces celebrated the alliance of politics with science, they were rather uncritical of the strategy prescribed for the regulation of society and the radical rethinking of social relations.

In his thought-provoking essay *Health is Membership*<sup>11</sup> from 1994, Wendell Berry offers a radical reassessment of the lamentable methodological tendency of the Western theological vision, pointing out the rather absurd practical consequences of using *division* and *separation* as the main tool of approaching reality. One of his examples is the way in which sickness is interpreted. He observes that the man who is in pain is taken to the hospital to be treated by experts whose single concern is to detect and eliminate the cause of his sickness. The patient is thereby separated from his family by the modern medical praxis and is thus deprived of the relationships that could help him reintegrate the meaning of the sickness into his life. By treating it this way, the sickness becomes an even greater problem, alienating the patient from his most constitutive relations: his family, body, self and nature.

Even if one does not want to reject the benefits of modern medicine, it is not hard to see that the method of separation and elimination is not only used in medical praxis and scientific research but also defines the general cultural attitude towards sickness.<sup>12</sup> Although these two fields are certainly interrelated, the logic of how patients are treated is not necessarily the same that is applied concerning medical and curative measurements. The method of diagnosis should not have to lead to the separation of the person from his or her most fundamental relations since the sickness does not affect only the body, but rather the person as a "whole". The concept of health - as Berry argues - is derived from "holy" and "wholeness" and can only be restored with the help of the community and through the patient's relations.

The sick person often undergoes the psychological process of losing his or her own self - the one previously considered to be the real (potent, healthy, fully capacitated) self. Sickness in terms of suffering from the uncontrollable disguising of the "self" is a change that needs to be overcome not just mentally and bodily, but also spiritually. This is only possible through recovering the most *constitutive relationships of our existence*. Therefore, even if it is recommendable to wear a mask and "social distance" for now, the reconstruction of society during and after the pandemic cannot follow this logic. In fact, social distancing may well be one aspect of the pandemic that brings about long-lasting negative consequences, as the disintegration of social spheres can hardly be overcome by a society already suffering from a narcissistic individualism.

## 2. THE SUSPICIOUS BODY

Another worrisome cultural tendency of postindustrial societies that Covid-19 helped bring to the forefront concerns our cultural

patterns of interpreting the body and bodily existence. The underlying ontological assumption, which is in need of serious revision, is based on a perverted postmodern version of the old Cartesian<sup>13</sup> dualism of body and soul. While classic modern dualism accepted the soul's superiority and focused on the interaction of these two dimensions of human existence, different versions of contemporary transhumanism<sup>14</sup> regard the body not only as the only autonomous sphere of reality, but also as a structure that can and should be enhanced in order to provide the experience of a constructed, individually designed "reality". In this social, cultural and economic setting, the body is no longer depicted as an organic part of nature but rather as a fragile, vulnerable and insufficiently developed entity that needs substantial improvements such claim when looking at the blurry line between medicine that restores health and that which improves bodily conditions<sup>15</sup>.

A survey of history helps us to make a rather simple point: The body, once considered the substance in which the human and divine were united (through the Incarnation), and still venerated later as part of *nature*, is radically devalued today: In our transhumanist societies, the body is no longer seen for what it is but rather for its capacity to be technically enhanced and transformed. Suspicion is cast over the natural body for its low performance, fragility, vulnerability and even for its relatively "low variability".

The novelty of Covid-19 in this respect is the overwhelming public acceptance of a claim that was already sustained by different important players in the healthcare industry (among others) according to which the body is the bearer of a virus and needs to be artificially protected. Who today would deny that humans are potentially dangerous to each other without

even noticing it, independent of their volitional acts, just by having a body? In short, according to this reasoning, masks - in the broader sense of artificial barriers to social and physical interaction - are essentially necessary in order to provide safety in our social relationships.

Let me offer here the simple reformulation of a classic piece of wisdom in order to reframe the issue: Social interactions in general and any form of authentic love implies being exposed to the greatest possible existential demands. The necessary, prudent act of self-protection as well as the desire to protect others cannot change the basic logic of interpersonal relations: Being the source of the highest happiness requires exposing oneself and doing so bodily. It is the body that enters this basic dynamic of giving away and receiving oneself, and the body that can transmit and communicate the self, the loving devotion to the other. This essential gift-character of the body contextualizes and limits all possible suspicions currently projected onto it.

Society after Covid-19, besides protecting people from the virus, has a far greater task: restoring the dignity of bodily existence in order that good-will, compassion and passionate caring for the other, although risky and demanding, can once again be fully and freely communicated.

### 3. REGULATING AND RESTRUCTURING PRIVATE RELATIONSHIPS

The modern politics of Western democracies are partially based on the distinction between the private and the public sphere, and human relations, being complex, often oscillate between these two realms. Crossing the border between public and private becomes especially relevant concerning mask-usage. For example: In the home, a mask is not obligatory until

someone tests positive for the virus, but even in our own house, friends and guests have to wear a mask and go through the same rituals that they would in any public building. Severe administrative regulations caused the private space, previously free and safe from political power, to evaporate. Even our own body had to be masked and protected according to rules defined by the government, and this was often done in a contradictory and questionable way. Hardly anywhere was considered to be a safe, virus-free space - and apparently, there must be an administrative power regulating and intervening everywhere the virus could possibly be, leaving no room for prudence and individual responsibility.

More troubling still is the questionable anthropological foundations of the logic used to establish administrative measures. From the perspective of administrative power, behind the obligatory mask, there is not a *person* who is defined by his or her complex communities; instead, there is an *individual* bearer of the virus who is exposed to life-threatening danger. Meanwhile, the exclusive right to distinguish, identify and regulate social relations corresponds to the administrative power.

I am not questioning the legitimacy or necessity of wearing masks during the pandemic, I merely want to stress how exceptional our situation is and how disturbing the transformation of political power. Faced with a complex threat regarding which only the administrative institutions have relatively complete information, they redefine what is public and private on the basis of a new and questionable anthropological basis that sees citizens in depersonalizing individualistic terms. Additionally, these powers can and apparently must regulate and limit citizens' relations.

Moreover, the world in which one could find seclusion and consolation in the private sphere

and in unrestricted personal relationships in times of societal troubles (like war, for example) does not exist anymore. was not only the obligatory mask that separated us, but those in power who felt entitled to bar relatives from nursing homes, thereby ordering parents and grandparents to die without their family. Even if there were no other way to save lives, it is shocking that these radical regulations were accepted without any public conversation, without contemplating different scenarios than those which, in the end, drastically prohibited and eventually *virtualised* our relationships.<sup>16</sup>

Undoubtedly, the mandating of mask-wearing in private relationships alone (not to mention the limitations on and eventual prohibition of the presence of family members at important existential life events, was a political act that remapped the field of action for modern political democracies (which, in contrast to dictatorships, were supposed to limit their power to the regulation of the public sphere). Civic obedience cannot, however, imply tacit acceptance by the new emerging political subject"<sup>17</sup>; the masked individual citizen without relations (or with possibly infected relations in need of regulation by the state).

In the world after Covid-19, the idea of this new political subject should be reshaped to one of a *free political subject who is realized in acts of free self-gift*.<sup>18</sup> Charity and caring for others implies both prudence and consideration for the good of the community; therefore, the free subject must not be restricted by any political entity or administrative power - not even for safety reasons - for they are the very foundation of politics. In contrast to some post-modern reductions<sup>19</sup>, politics is understood here in a traditional sense, as the art of seeking the common good of the community, not the mere administrative power that guarantees our safety as consumers.

#### 4. THE VIRTUALISATION OF RELATIONSHIPS

Another alarming feature of contemporary society made more apparent by Covid-19 is the virtualisation of human relations. The global phenomena of the obligatorily mask is just one example of how bodily presence in relationships has become increasingly undesirable. It is often argued that exponential technical development has facilitated distance-relationships, but the other side of the coin is the invasion of relationships by virtual reality. The persons who can actually participate in *in-person* interactions - either in the workplace or at home - prefer the safety offered by the intervention of a controllable technical device.

It would be unreasonable to deny that the mask offers protection, but it would be equally unreasonable to let virtual relationships be the model for and replacement of bodily presence. In comparison with virtual reality, there is a considerably higher risk of being truly involved with someone through being bodily and spiritually present with them. All these three-dimensional places with their inconveniences are increasingly replaced by two-dimensional virtual reality without much fuss about losing the third dimension: place, physicality. The continuously developing, high-tech virtual reality may well surpass physical reality in intensity and could potentially offer an infinitely wild range of control over what happens (and doesn't happen) in it, but there are ontologically and ethically relevant, unsurpassable limitations here as well.

First, virtual events cannot surprise us; this effect is replaced by "decisions" made by algorithms, while the ontological surprise of real life always points to the ultimate meaning of all that there is. Secondly, the content that is always virtually at our disposal does not have a history



or a future and therefore cannot meaningfully connect to the human experience of the passage of time. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, virtual life is always a reduced one, a masked experience in the sense that one is not really, fully at the disposition of or exposed to others. This might seem to be an advantage, but it is a real impediment to any authentic act of love. In summary, one can only be surprised by love, even by one's own feelings; one can only love in real time and by mutually revealing oneself to the other.

Even once the pandemic situation is under control, the urgent dilemma will remain for those who survive: Shall we, without any resistance, renounce the "space-time reality" of our relationships for the control and comfort of the aggressively-invading virtual world? Can we still deal with the complexity of personal and real-time relationships, which are full of uncontrollable surprises? Those who are bravehearted enough to love someone - a creature who will die one day - know that it is worth it to resist the invasion of the virtual both personally and culturally. We must insist on our own, real, human limitations in the three-dimensional historic and dramatic world, which not only allows for encounter with the divine but is pervaded by its sacred presence.

## 5. REVISED PHENOMENOLOGY OF OTHER-PERCEPTION

Wearing a mask not only hides the face, but also makes it more interesting and more intriguing. This phenomenon is well-known and has been greatly exploited by women wearing veils. Taking away the mask reinforces the effect of revealing one's face. It is surprising how little we can perceive of the other person and how limited our understanding becomes when his or her face is covered. It is as if one would lose a channel of perception, or one of our senses: the reality is the same, but there would be a great

limitation in accessing it. When wanting to understand the other, one must rely on *empathetic imagination*. Every word spoken from behind the mask must be associated with the image, recalled from memory, of a facial expression which would normally transmit the speaker's emotional state. Since it is not the whole face that is covered, our attention is naturally diverted to the voice and the eyes in order to make up for what would be lost.

Thanks to Covid-19, we have more opportunity than ever to confirm the old truth expressed by Cicero: "*Ut imago est animi voltus sic indices oculi*", "the eyes are the mirror of the soul". In times of reduced physical contact and facial expressions, looking into another's eyes has become one of the most important and intimate channels of communication, of opening ourselves to the other. Whereas expressions keep our attention on the surface, the eyes function in a completely different way, calling us to the depths. It is no wonder that it is considered inappropriate to exchange deep looks with people we are not intimate with. One can hide behind facial expressions, but there is almost no chance to hide what our eyes express, hence the existence of social codes that protect us from this kind of self-exposure.

In short, in wearing masks during the pandemic, we are at the same time less and more exposed to the other: less, because of the mask covering our face, but more because the communication through the voice and primarily through the eyes has gained more importance. While we have lost the habit of handshakes and kisses, perhaps we have learned to look into the eyes and be more connected to what they show us - an important cultural experience that brings us to the next point.

## 6. WEARING THE MASK AS A SIGN OF BEING CONNECTED

Thanks to massive media campaigns, wearing a mask became a sign of good and obedient citizenship and, further still, of responsibility and solidarity. We all accept that masks protect both the wearer and those they come into contact with, especially the most vulnerable. Those who are young and healthy in particular accept the measures proposed by virologists not only, and maybe even not primarily, for their own protection, but for that of others. *Solidarity became a social norm* on a personal level in societies that proclaimed that self-realization and self-interest was the motor of their progress<sup>20</sup>.

From a Christian point of view, there is less novelty in this peculiar but positive cultural change for perhaps two major reasons that underpin Christian social doctrine: While acknowledging that everyone is personally invited to salvation through Christ, Christians affirm that the person is a relational being, called to reject individualism and resist its cultural and economic manifestations. Regarding the person as constituted through relations on the one hand and acknowledging the *condition humana* (the need of salvation) on the other, Christians know that we are meant to *carry each other's crosses*, as Jesus Christ took the cross of our sins on His shoulder.

Covid-19 illustrates how each person's fragility and vulnerability affects everyone, and even those with whom we are not related or connected still depend on us. We can acknowledge this dependency with grace by accepting the burden and acknowledging the beauty of being and living in relation with the whole of creation. This realization concerning Covid-19 that "we are in the same boat" is proclaimed by the Christian tradition in radically personal terms: *In Christ we are one body*.

Philosophically speaking, the unity of one mystical body implies that, since everything is

connected in an organic and intelligible way, the sickness of one member affects the whole organism. Thus, we are all responsible for each other, albeit in different ways and with reasonably distinct measures. This has too often been explained in exclusively moral terms without noticing how this idea of embodied morality has its concrete bodily and material foundations in re.

Thus, wearing the mask is a sign of being connected on many different levels, from the material to the mystical unity of creation, which is perhaps best expressed as a loving solidarity with all actual and possible suffering. It is also a sign of hope that willingly accepting this burden may help others to survive and to live a happier life.

#### **AN APPEAL TO CHARITABLE IMAGINATION AND TO RESIST THE DISEMBODIMENT OF RELATIONS**

Behind the masks, behind the fearfully closed doors, and in those nursing homes where our parents and grandparents died in loneliness during the confinement, the invisible but real drama we have been facing Shattered the concept of individualism. What happened concerned us all deeply; moreover, it became evident how it is connected to global economics as well as cultural and environmental issues. This might help us to see the experiential and factual basis of the Christian claim according to which any personal drama is of utmost importance for the whole of creation. What is at stake in these dramatic events is nothing less than the being as such that is reconstituted in and co-constituted by each human soul<sup>21</sup>.

It would therefore be erroneous to reduce the dramatic question to whether this or that individual will survive, but instead: Can you, amidst the pandemic, amidst your suffering or the sickness of your loved ones, still affirm that

being is good and life is precious? The long journey of each of us towards a wholehearted "yes" may be hidden behind the masks, doors and social measures that are increasingly defined by the idea of safe distance rather than self-giving; however, the affirmation of being and thus, that of the other person must still be communicated. The good must be expressed and realized: *Bonum est diffusivum sui*. The loving testimony of every single person we encounter that reflects the genuine and original goodness of being contributes to one's personal response and enriches it.

There is a responsibility to enter the drama of the other that cannot be rejected, because not answering the call that is expressed by his or her very existence is already a meaningful response. That is why - however one ought to cooperate with the health and safety measures imposed on us - we must take care to preserve the irreducible human, personal and bodily character of our relationships, the ways in which our love and solidarity can be manifested by all that we are.

The pandemic refuted all illusions of normality, and the political and cultural reaction in many ways accelerated the problematic process of the post-modern transformation of human relations: They are continuously more impersonal, tendentiously more virtual and artificial and disembodied. This calls for a critical theoretical assessment, but also for the revitalization of old, pre-pandemic habits that were acquired in living together with concrete others, not in virtual communities.

The peaceful resistance to the individualizing tendencies of a post-pandemic world is not manifested in starting a social movement, launching an effective media campaign or taking action in order to influence political players. Any real and long-lasting social transformation starts with a small and invisible motion of the heart; it is due to a more open,

generous attitude towards the other that is then confirmed by reality. In the current social and cultural context, it is typical for the other's personhood to be veiled and obfuscated concerning its moral and spiritual condition. What is hidden behind the reductions of the fragmented knowledge offered by diverse scientific disciplines thus needs to be imaginatively discovered, something that usually takes place through art and poetry.

Openness and any loving gesture towards the other happens in a dramatic context. It implies accepting the risk of being personally rejected and hurt; thus, the sort of imagination required must be both empathic and courageous. Yet, imagination that is used for the purpose of discovering reality rather than constructing a parallel universe of self-protection is disoriented if it is detached from the religious and cultural the acts that break through artificial limits and frontiers towards the core of personhood.

Once again it is true that imaginative innovation - the rediscovery of human personhood behind masks - can be based on the tradition of appreciating not just the struggle, but the real and shining testimony of those who courageously and imaginatively insisted on the fraternity of all humans when the logic of war apparently governed all relationships.

Real, in-person, face-to-face human encounters offer infinitely more than a mere idealistic projection of ultimate reconciliation; only art is capable of accounting for the depth of such an experience. One example is Claudio Monteverdi's *Il combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda* SV 153 in which, at the end of a tragic battle between a man and a woman - political opponents separated by language, religion and war - Tancredi takes away the supposed enemy's helmet (the ultimate mask) and discovers the

most loveable countenance behind it. What is veiled by the mask can open up heaven.

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## NOTES

1. Etruscan phersu (from Greek próso̓pa "face, mask") + -na a suffix, πρόσωπον.(prosopon).
2. "Reversal of the Situation is a change by which the action veers round to its opposite, subject always to our rule of probability or necessity. [...] Recognition, as the name indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined by the poet for good or bad fortune." See Aristotle, *The Poetics of Aristotle*, trans. S.H. Butcher, Project Gutenberg, last modified 22 January 2013, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1974/1974-h/1974-h.htm>.
3. The word catharsis drops out of *The Poetics* because the word wonder, to *rhaumaston*, replaces it: first in chapter 9, where Aristotle argues that pity and fear arise most of all where wonder does, and finally in chapters 24 and 25, where he singles out wonder as the aim of the poetic art itself, into which the aim of tragedy in particular merges.
4. The notion stems from Origen and was further elaborated by the Cappadocian fathers, especially Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor. Its meaning can be defined in simple terms as follows: *theosis* "is the process of sanctification of Christians whereby they become progressively conformed to God; a conformation that is ultimately demonstrated in the glorious transfiguration of the just in the heavenly Kingdom, when immortality and a more perfect vision (and knowledge and experience) of God are clearly manifested in the glorification of the faithful." J.A. McGuckin, "Deification in Greek Patristic Thought: The Cappadocian Fathers' Strategic Adaptation of a Tradition," in *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Tradition*, eds. Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006), 95-114, <http://www.sgt.org/Writings/Patristics/Deification.html>; Athanasius, *De Incarnatione Verbi: Einleitung, Übersetzung, Kommentar*, eds., trans. E. P. Meijering with J.C.M. van Winden (Amsterdam: J.C. Gieben, 1989); Gregory of Nyssa, *Orationes* 29.19: "I may become god in so far as he became man." Supporters of this idea refer to the following Biblical passages: In. 10, 34-36 and 2 Pet. 1:4; Cf. Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov, eds., *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology*, vol. I. Princeton Theological Monograph Series 52 (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006); Mark O'Keefe, "Theosis and the Christian Life: toward Integrating Roman Catholic Ethics and Spirituality," *Eglise et théologie* 25, no. 1 (1994): 47-63.
5. "Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear." John Paul II, "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et spes*," *The Holy See*, 7 December [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudim-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudim-et-spes_en.html).

6. I would thus go beyond the classic Thomist definition of culture offered, for example, by Ocampo Ponce. See Manuel Ocampo Ponce, *Filosofía de la cultura* (Valencia: EDICEP, 2015), p. 17.
7. For a thoughtful analysis of Derrida's account, see Kas Saghafi, "An Almost Unheard-of Analogy: Derrida Reading Levinas, *Bulletin de la Société Américaine de Philosophie de langue Française* 15, no. 1 (2005): 41-71, <https://ffp.pitt.edu/ojs/index.php/jffp/article/viewFile/250/244>.
8. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Black Swan, 2006); Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (London: Penguin, 2006); Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2004); Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (London: Twelve Books, 2007); Tina Beattie, *The New Atheists: The Twilight of Reason and the War on Religion* (New York: Orbis, 2008); Peter L. Berger, ed., *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999).
9. As John O'Sullivan stated; "A post-Christian society is not merely a society in which agnosticism or atheism is the prevailing fundamental belief. It is a society rooted in the history, culture, and practices of Christianity but in which the religious beliefs of Christianity have been either rejected or, worse, forgotten. In other words a post-Christian society is a particular sort of Christian society." John O'Sullivan, "Our Post-Christian Society", *National Review*, 14 December 2013, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2013/12/our-post-christian-society-john-osullivan/>, See also Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).
10. Byung-Chul Han, *Transparenzgesellschaft* (Berlin: Verlag Matthes & Seitz Berlin, 2015).
11. Wendell Berry, "Health is Membership," 17 October 1994, <http://tipiglen.co.uk/berryhealth.html>. See also Wendell Berry, "The Isolation of the Body", in *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2002), pp. 100-102
12. Not only are the attitudes different, but the concepts of life that they are related to are as well: Life as it is given in personal experiences has a gift-character that is obfuscated when objectified to mere data. The illness of medicine itself (see Josef Seifert, *The Philosophical Diseases of Medicine and Their Cure: Philosophy and Ethics of Medicine*, vol. 1: Foundations, Philosophy and Medicine 82 (Dordrecht: Springer Science & Business Media, 2004)) is rooted in an equivocal understanding of life: The medical doctor looks at life as a however-important item of a complex system of data and not as it is experienced by the patient, and yet what he or she has to cure is the person, who has to dramatically assume the experience of his or her personal fragility. Even the best treatment of the body, when not taking care of this ontological deficit concerning life, remains essentially unsatisfactory.
13. Michel Henry, *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body*, trans. Girard Etzkorn (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975): pp. 136-154.
14. Max More, "The Philosophy of Transhumanism", in *The Transhumanist Reader*, eds. Max More and Natasha Vita-More (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

15. M. J. McNamee and S. D. Edwards, "Transhumanism, medical technology and slippery slopes," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 32, no. 9 (2006): 513-518.
16. One noteworthy exception to this general statement is the "Great Barrington Declaration" (Martin Kulldorff, Sunetra Gupta and Jay Bhattacharya, "The Great Barrington Declaration," 4 October 2020, <https://gbdeclaration.org/> that received some public attention (mostly negative); the authors even met with some members of the Trump administration.
17. Before the pandemic, Agamben described what is (according to Michel Foucault) essentially bio-politics with the very problematic term "naked life". He keenly observed that the current political system's legitimacy is based on a continuous emergency situation in which sovereignty can be manifested over the depersonalized subject. See Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Cesare Casarino and Vincenzo Binetti, Theory Out of Bounds Series 20 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000): pp. 4-5).
18. It is a cornerstone of Christian anthropology to define the person as a relational being whose purpose is to freely give him or herself away in a loving relationship. See especially John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body* (Boston, MA: Pauline Books & Media, 2006).
19. Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Cesare Casarino and Vincenzo Binetti, Theory Out of Bounds Series 20 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).
20. It is not my task here to talk about solidarity in the pandemic situation on a governmental level or concerning the thousands of forms it has manifested in different initiatives of civil society.
21. Aristotle correctly affirms that the intellect is potentially, although not actually, each of its objects. See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 429b6-9.
22. We have seen in the past - especially in the bloody twentieth century - how a person can be deprived not only of all of their rights of a citizen, but also of his or her inalienable human dignity, and can be transformed into what Agamben calls "naked life". The only way to resist this temptation is through imagination that does not invent a parallel universe but rather penetrates into being and is able to discover and affirm the *homo sacer* behind the citizen and even in those who are reduced to "naked life" for being unborn, refugees, etc.
23. Héctor G. Barnés, "Los errores que no habríamos cometido si escuchásemos a los sociólogos", *El Confidencial*, 4 October 2020, <https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/2020-10-04/errores-cometido-sociologos-coronavirus-2773344/>.