

THE POPE
AND THE PANDEMIC

*Lessons in Leadership
in a Time of Crisis*

AGBONKHIANMEGHE E. OROBATOR, SJ

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Introduction

We Don't Need Another Hero

We are witnesses to these things.

—*Acts 5:32*

In 2020, a crisis of unprecedented proportion erupted, roiled, and changed the world abruptly, unexpectedly, and irreversibly. By nature, a crisis is a complex occurrence or situation that reveals a range of associated multilayered conditions of societal dysfunctionalities. At first glance, such an occurrence may seem to be a simple fact or outcome of social existence. It can, however, very quickly evolve into an enormous challenge, generate a complex set of problems, and exacerbate existing and precarious societal conditions.¹ Regardless of how it manifests, a crisis poses a grave threat to existing arrangements at personal and collective levels of existence.

¹ This idea is analogous to what English anthropologist Timothy Jenkins describes as an “algebra of implication” or a “can of worms.” In the local English society that he studies, he discovers that the kin relationship and acquaintances among local families are so complex that it is practically impossible to deal with an individual without implicating the extensive range of the person’s familial relationships. Timothy Jenkins, *Religion in English Everyday Life: An Ethnographic Approach* (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), 109–37.

This understanding of crisis aptly defines the coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) that has rattled the entire global population in unparalleled ways as a contagious virus of frightening potential and scale, inflicting incalculable damage on lives and livelihoods. The ravaging march of this virus brought the world to a standstill or, more accurately, to its knees. Everything either stopped or closed, and almost overnight a new vocabulary of lockdown and isolation gained prominence. The surviving global population counts as living witnesses to an apocalyptic occurrence that cut swaths of bodily and economic destruction and sowed mayhem across the world. There is a growing collection of narratives that attempt to understand the multifaceted dimensions and consequences of the crisis engendered by the coronavirus pandemic. Aside from the human cost, as yet to be fully computed in personal, social, and economic terms, the tragedy of COVID-19 also surfaces questions for deeper reflection, study, and understanding. The specific purpose of this book, which explores and examines the leadership dimensions of the crisis, is to study and reflect on Pope Francis's leadership during a global health emergency that has paralyzed the world.

A disclaimer is in order here. I am an admirer of Pope Francis and, like him, I am a Jesuit. My vocational identity does not account for my admiration for the pope, however. The idea of writing a book on leadership predates COVID-19, but this crisis turned out to be a somewhat auspicious context and moment for its actualization. Francis's approach to the crisis exemplifies a certain style of leadership that is worth paying attention to, particularly as part of a process of learning the lessons of the coronavirus crisis.² Leadership is critical in times

² In speaking of "lessons," I do not imply that the coronavirus pandemic is an occurrence with some implicit or explicit meaning, be it instructive or punitive, naturally or supernaturally instigated. I thus apply the notion of *kairos* with caution. The role of pandemics in the social construction of reality from a religious perspective is a contested subject

of uncertainty, and the coronavirus pandemic has exposed a deep crisis in leadership on a global scale. This public health emergency has subjected the notion and practice of leadership to a stress test, and judging by the performance of leaders across the globe, the report card has revealed significant gaps, mistakes, and failures. From Brazil to Britain, the US to India, and all across the continents of Europe, Asia, Latin America, Oceania, and Africa, heroes and heroines have emerged from the debris of this crisis. Conversely, there is no dearth of villains and charlatans masquerading as leaders, all the while lacking empathy, honesty, and aptitude. When their prevarications and procrastinations are exposed, some of these straw men (they are almost exclusively men!) have downplayed the severity of the viral outbreak as a hoax, or as an illness no worse than the seasonal flu or even the sniffles. Others have resorted to a crude blame game, even as infections and deaths from COVID-19 rose alarmingly. Some names inevitably come to mind, but I abstain from listing them. Those who are in the group of heroes and heroines have been justly recognized and feted for handling the crisis with foresight, resolve, empathy, and integrity. In particular, their focus rested solidly on advancing the causes of solidarity, human dignity, and the common good. Their concern for human life rightly took precedence over short-term political considerations. In contrast, the impostors fell short on all counts, blundering their way through a life-threatening global health crisis and squandering the opportunity to contain an outbreak the scale of which is unprecedented in the modern era. This book offers a critique of such leadership gaps simply by highlighting Francis's leadership style and preferences. While some politicians have seen their credibility collapse due to their inept management of the coronavirus pandemic, I believe that Francis has stood out as a global reference point. This book is

among historians, sociologists, and theologians. See Stephen Bullivant, *Catholicism in the Time of Coronavirus* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire, 2020), 1–9, www.wordonfire.org.

a reflection on how one person leads by word and by deed in extraordinary and challenging times, and on what lessons we can draw from his example.

Of course, Pope Francis is not an elected political leader. He lives in a ninety-one-year-old UNESCO-designated World Heritage site, variously named “Holy See,” “Vatican City,” or “the Vatican,” which has fewer than a thousand citizens. Amid the coronavirus crisis, he was not saddled with the burden of making consequential decisions, like how to run a national health service, when to impose or ease a lockdown, or how to safely reopen and revive a battered or collapsed national economy. But he exercises authority beyond the walls of the Vatican over Catholicism’s global community of approximately 1.3 billion adherents, and his influence as a leader often intersects with political and economic domains. He famously elevated politics to a quasi-religious dais when he declared it one of the highest forms of charity. Since his election to the papacy in 2013, he has demonstrated a kind of prophetic and pastoral leadership that seeks to be inclusive yet decisive in reforming the politics, economics, and practices of the Roman Catholic Church. His style prioritizes the communicative ethics of *parrhesia*, that is, the ability to speak with boldness and listen with humility. Even outside of the church, his leadership and authoritative voice continue to reverberate across a global landscape, encompassing topical issues such as ecology, economics, armed conflict, international migration, and nationalism.

Since the election of Pope Francis, many columnists and scholars, commentators and pundits, Vaticanologists and journalists seem to have happened upon a new, prolific, and, perhaps, lucrative enterprise of decoding, deconstructing, and deciphering the 266th successor to Peter. Their mixed motives have produced mixed results. In the assessment of one expert, Francis “is a complex man, not easily analyzed.”³ Notwith-

³ John O’Malley, “Reconciling Doctrine, Theology, Spirituality, and Pastoralism,” in *Pope Francis: A Voice for Mercy, Justice, Love, and Care*

standing, there is no shortage of books on Francis the pope, leader, reformer, teacher, advocate, and Jesuit.⁴ Each of these books offers fascinating and valuable insights into Francis's dynamic personality, profound wisdom, and revolutionary vision for church and society, all of which have served him well as a leader—occasionally, however, he has drawn the ire of detractors and adversaries, and even inspired a few counter-narratives.⁵ This book departs from the trajectory and emphases of current studies of Pope Francis, and focuses solely on the art of leading in a time of crisis. The specific but universal context for undertaking this study is the coronavirus pandemic. The principal premise is that Francis's leadership has not been confined to his Catholic flock; its reach has extended across the globe. By reflecting upon his words and deeds, I pay close attention to how the pope's handling of the crisis exemplifies a certain style of leadership that in turn reflects his overall pastoral and prophetic style of ministry. As such, I believe that the lessons identified and examined in this book will be valuable for a global audience of people in leadership positions, both in the church and in the broader society.

for the Earth, ed. Barbara E. Wall and Massimo Faggioli (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019), 21.

⁴ The list includes the following recent releases: Austen Ivereigh, *Wounded Shepherd: Pope Francis's Struggle to Convert the Catholic Church* (New York: Henry Holt, 2019); Massimo Faggioli, *The Liminal Papacy of Pope Francis: Moving toward Global Catholicity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2020); Christopher Lamb, *The Outsider: Pope Francis and His Battle to Reform the Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2020); Gerard O'Connell, *The Election of Pope Francis: An Inside Account of the Conclave That Changed History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019); and Barbara E. Wall and Massimo Faggioli, eds., *Pope Francis: A Voice for Mercy, Justice, Love, and Care for the Earth* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019).

⁵ For example, H. J. A. Sire (aka Marcantonio Colonna), *The Dictator Pope: The Inside Story of the Francis Papacy* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2017).

New York on My Mind

In the afternoon of Tuesday, April 14, 2020, the Archbishop of New York Archdiocese, Cardinal Timothy Dolan, answered a telephone call from the Vatican. The caller was Pope Francis. Under normal circumstances such a call would have been routine and not newsworthy. But the context was significant: New York State had become the epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic in the US. Outside of Italy and Spain, the state was recording the largest daily rates of infection, and it had more coronavirus fatalities than any other state in the country. New York was on the mind of Francis when he called Cardinal Dolan to—according to the latter’s social media account—“express his love, concern, and closeness to all the people of New York, especially those who are sick, during the coronavirus outbreak.” “New Yorkers,” said the pope, “are in my prayers in a special way at this time.” As mentioned, ordinarily, there wouldn’t be anything particularly remarkable about a midafternoon international call from one religious leader to another. But from the perspective of this book, the papal phone call spoke volumes. The cardinal’s response to Francis helps to elucidate the focus and rationale of this book: “I thanked the Pope for *the leadership he has displayed during this global pandemic*, and assured him of the love and prayers of the people of New York for him and his ministry.”⁶ A crisis can illuminate the exercise or practice of (good) leadership. However, the kind of leadership displayed by Francis was not always in evidence, even among religious leaders.

This book is about a global icon and his leadership style in the midst of a global crisis. It is neither a character study nor a biopic; it is also not simply a historical account of how Pope Francis handled the coronavirus crisis, though a sequence of

⁶ Robin Gomes, “Covid-19: Pope Calls to Express His Closeness to New Yorkers,” *Vatican News*, April 15, 2020 (www.vaticannews.va). Emphasis mine.

events will be recounted to set the context for the discussion. Some of the previously mentioned books have dealt almost exhaustively with the character and biography of Francis. The methodology adopted for this book is best described as a complementary dual approach: (1) it observes and examines the activities of the pope during the coronavirus crisis, asking how Pope Francis has led in such challenging times and circumstances; (2) it distills the constitutive elements of leadership in the particular moment of the coronavirus crisis, asking and attempting to answer the questions: What does good leadership look like during a crisis? What does Francis's leadership teach us in a time of crisis?

In the ongoing quest to discover and learn the lessons of the coronavirus pandemic for all facets of life, it is critically important to identify, analyze, and draw leadership lessons for the future of the world, whether or not the virus is eradicated. To my knowledge, there is as yet no such study that profiles the leadership of Pope Francis in the context of the coronavirus crisis.⁷ There is a relatively small body of literature on leadership in times of crisis that focuses on the coronavirus pandemic, but these works deal almost exclusively with corporate and country leadership.⁸ As a result, but understandably, such literature overlooks people like Francis. In exploring these questions, I do not intend to enter into dialogue or

⁷ Antonio Spadaro's article, "Pope Francis and the Coronavirus Crisis," in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, April 9, 2020 (www.laciviltacattolica.com), reflects on and highlights the key points of Pope Francis's interview with Austen Ivereigh, "Take Care of Yourselves for a Future That Will Come," *The Tablet* (April 11, 2020).

⁸ See, for example, Michaela J. Kerrissey and Amy C. Edmondson, "What Good Leadership Looks Like during This Pandemic," *Harvard Business Review*, April 13, 2020 (www.hbr.org); Gemma D'Auria and Aaron De Smet, "Leadership in a Crisis: Responding to the Coronavirus Outbreak and Future Challenges," *McKinsey & Company*, March 16, 2020 (www.mckinsey.com).

dispute with theoretical and conceptual models of leadership. My aims and purposes are modest: I am asking, “What do we need to learn from the way that Francis has gone about fulfilling his duties as a leader in the heat of a global public health crisis?” Not every leader will have to face a crisis of the same magnitude as the coronavirus pandemic. But a crisis is a crisis no matter the level at which it occurs. In the wider context of leadership, the dynamics of a crisis are clearly distinguishable: it tests our resolve, shakes our confidence, and challenges our convictions. There is a slight chance that by the time this book is published the world will have moved on—but, in all likelihood, a global reckoning may still be in progress. The heroes and heroines will continue to be recognized and feted, while the villains and charlatans will be unmasked and castigated.

The sources used for this book include the homilies, reflections, messages, statements, and prayers of Pope Francis. The contexts and circumstances of their delivery are varied; they include the scheduled weekly Angelus address, Regina Caeli address, and papal audiences, as well as the specially arranged liturgical events at the Vatican, including the pope’s daily Eucharistic celebrations in the chapel of Casa Santa Marta. The pope is a global public figure who is never far from the scrutinizing eyes of journalists, correspondents, and reporters, both accredited and freelancers. I had the privilege of accessing numerous sources of rich information on the pope’s daily activities during the pandemic in religious and secular newspapers, magazines, agencies, online news feeds, and journals, most of them marked by excellent journalism and reporting. Although the pope comes across as reserved and self-effacing, there are important interviews conducted by seasoned journalists that open a window into his thinking and offer insights on his approach to leadership in a time of crisis. The main character of this book is not a passive object of study lending itself to a narrow analysis; the consideration of the materials on Pope Francis in a time of crisis entails a process of evaluation, inter-

pretation, and judgment from which emerge the main lessons set forth in this book. Some readers could conceivably and rightly draw alternative and less flattering conclusions about the pope and his leadership of the church, either in a time of crisis or in general.

Besides the pope's words, of greater significance are his actions, decisions, and gestures in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. If actions speak louder than words, Francis is a master of the power of symbolism. I have dedicated chapters 1 and 4 to the potency and authenticity of gestures that transcend mere rhetoric. Also, in these chapters, I explore the use and efficacy of symbolism, spoken and enacted, as a medium of messaging in a time of crisis. What is clear is that the combination of sources—Francis's words and deeds—constitutes a powerful message of faith, hope, love, care, solidarity, and compassion in a time of crisis. The peak of this compendium of messaging falls within Lent and Eastertide of 2020. Together these two high liturgical seasons of the church provide a salubrious backdrop for confronting the headwinds of despair, fear, and death occasioned by the coronavirus pandemic. Through a close study of Pope Francis's statements and actions during these moments it is possible to trace the contours of his leadership, one that inspires and instructs, consoles and comforts, especially in challenging times.

Keep in Mind

To understand the thrust of the analysis and reflections contained in this book, it is important to keep five considerations in mind. First, the documentary materials and empirical evidence collected and examined for this book have a fixed timeline. Chinese officials first reported the existence of atypical cases of pneumonia in Wuhan, China, to the World Health Organization's (WHO) China Country Office in Beijing on December 31, 2019. A month later, on January 30, 2020, the

WHO declared the outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. The coronavirus quickly spread across the world along a frightening trajectory that has left no country untouched. By July 2020, most countries had begun the complicated process of easing or lifting restrictions on social encounter, commercial activities, educational institutions, and human mobility, though strict prevention guidelines were introduced to stave off a second wave of infection. Despite continuing spikes and outbreaks, people across the world had become weary of lockdown, even as the WHO warned nations about the threat of a new and dangerous phase of the coronavirus pandemic.

This timeline of my writing is thus approximately six months, from December 2019 to July 2020. In one sense, this is a short time in which to make the kind of argument attempted in this book.⁹ It is reassuring, though, that some of the lessons in leadership presented here have been verified and attested to by other writers and authors who have studied Pope Francis's handling of other crises and how he exemplifies a certain style of leadership. It could be argued that these lessons do not tell us much that is new about the leadership abilities of Francis; nonetheless, there is an added value in accentuating new and unique facets of those abilities in the exceptional circumstances of the coronavirus crisis. As will become evident in the chapters of this book, the discussion occasionally widens to address significant aspects of Francis's theological outlook and ethical preferences. These forays are neither fortuitous nor futile; the book aims to provide a wider context and framework for situating, interpreting, and understanding the distinctiveness of the pope's approach to leadership within his overall pastoral and prophetic style of ministry.

⁹ Mine is a generous timespan compared to Bullivant's *Catholicism in the Time of Coronavirus*, written "over the space of twelve days: Monday, March 30, to Friday, April 10, 2020," vii.

Second, I mentioned that Pope Francis is not a leader in the manner of contemporary political leaders. He leads a global community of believers who adhere to a set of beliefs, practice prescribed rituals, and undertake actions that embody their faith convictions. Yet the political implications of Francis's words and deeds are as influential and far-reaching as his audience is global and diverse. Amid the trials and tribulations of the pandemic, the pope has constructed and tailored his message to the world. Some readers may be familiar with the customary twice-yearly solemn blessing and message of popes for the city of Rome and for the entire world (his *Urbi et Orbi* address). While events such as this may be customary, by paying close attention to Pope Francis's performance, one notices that his approach to these functions is anything but the habitual indulgence of a custom. Whether he is conducting a solitary ritual in the cavernous St. Peter's Basilica or delivering a reflection in the Library of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican, Francis occupies a global podium from which he addresses people worldwide. Every activity thus bears leadership implications. In chapter 5, I describe how the art and skill of bridging political, sectarian, and ideological divides rests on an extraordinary power to convene, in order to mobilize attention and action by people across the globe—an essential leadership quality in a time of crisis.

Third, although Pope Francis stands on and speaks from a global platform to a worldwide audience, he neither abuses the privilege nor plays to the gallery. Where some political leaders seemed to glory in the opportunity presented by the coronavirus crisis to track and improve their favorability ratings, Francis's intent was just the opposite. I cannot find any evidence to suggest that the pope either craved or courted the favorable opinion of his audience during the pandemic. Granted, he is not a political or partisan leader like the rest—but the gulf between the leadership style of Pope Francis and many world leaders represents a salient testimony to the importance of

authentic leadership in a time of crisis. One poignant example may illustrate this point.

In a gesture reminiscent of the practice of some political leaders, Francis made a surprise call-in to a live Italian TV show on Good Friday 2020. The host—Lorena Bianchetti of *A Sua Immagine* (In His Image) on Italy’s Rai 1 channel—was visibly startled by the unexpected papal call. People who are familiar with the media circus orchestrated by certain politicians may find the tone and content of the pope’s TV conversation unusual at first. Of particular significance was the fact that the pope did not call in to dispute an ideological point, excoriate an irritating anchor, or pitch a political agenda. In a soothing and calming voice, Pope Francis shared his thought and preoccupation during the coronavirus pandemic with the program’s audience. In the context of a liturgical season commemorating the suffering and death of Jesus of Nazareth, Francis revealed that foremost in his thought were the “many crucified people in history and those of today.” They included, said the pope, the frontline health care workers in this pandemic, people “who die for love” and for the victims of COVID-19. Pope Francis professed his closeness to all those offering their lives to help others: “I am close to the people of God . . . close to the pain of the world. I am close, I am close to you all.” The call lasted a few brief minutes, but it moved the show’s host to tears.

There are many lessons to be learned from this brief and seemingly insignificant TV moment from the perspective of leadership. These lessons are outlined in three chapters of this book: in chapter 1, I discuss the paramount importance of providing a consoling accompaniment embodied in poignant gestures and symbols that communicate compassion, mercy, and hope in a time of crisis; in chapter 2, I focus on the significance of a preferential love for the poor, marginalized, and vulnerable people who bear the brunt of crises such as a pandemic; and in chapter 3, I consider the importance of celebrating the

goodness of humanity that shines through in the generosity and sacrifice of frontline workers. Taken together, my point is that these three elements illustrate essential qualities of leadership in a time of crisis.

There is a minor but important addendum to the preceding point. It concerns the fact that COVID-19 hit the world around the time of the seventh anniversary of the pontificate of Pope Francis. Although not given to a life of ostentation and ceremony, there wasn't a hint that Francis considered March 13, 2020, an important milestone to be marked at the height of a global crisis. The extraordinary circumstances created by the coronavirus pandemic completely eclipsed any thought of a papal celebration. I recall receiving an invitation from the Apostolic Nunciature in Nairobi, Kenya, in early February 2020, to a cocktail reception to mark the anniversary of Francis's election as pope. A few weeks later, the event was cancelled on account of the coronavirus pandemic. As the pope indicated to Lorena Bianchetti and her live TV audience, empathy, compassion, and closeness to the pain and anguish of the people were his unalloyed concerns in the time of the coronavirus crisis. As I point out in this book, the ability to focus on things that matter represents a key component of leadership in a time of crisis. Human dignity and the common good trump narrow and selfish interests.

Fourth, during the coronavirus pandemic, the use of authority mattered. Governments scrambled a raft of measures to contain, mitigate, and combat the virus: lockdowns, curfews, confinement, isolation, quarantines, stay-at-home and shelter-in-place orders, restrictions on mobility, and social distancing. As images online and on cable TV showed, in some places, these measures were enforced with brute force. Leader after leader spoke forcefully about the pandemic using military language, as if waging a war against a ruthless and invisible assailant. Across the world, some presidents and heads of governments seized the opportunity to revel in the practice of

prefacing and qualifying their title with the adjective “war-time.” Whether they understood this nomenclature literally or metaphorically, at times it came at a deadly cost. At one point in Nigeria, for example, more people had been killed by security operatives ostensibly enforcing lockdown and curfew than had succumbed to the coronavirus. According to data collected by the National Human Rights Commission and the Ministry of Health, barely two weeks into a partial lockdown in Nigeria, law enforcers had killed eighteen people, compared with twelve who had died from the coronavirus. Other law enforcers reportedly raped and assaulted women in Rwanda and Uganda, and Indian security forces moved against tens of thousands of migrant laborers who were demanding to return to their rural areas to increase their chances of surviving the effects of a nationwide lockdown. Where curfews were imposed, as in Nigeria, Uganda, and Kenya, there were reports of unlawful detention or abuse of people who were breaking curfew because they were desperately searching for food. Some Kenyan police infamously resorted to extorting bribes from curfew offenders by threatening to remand them in quarantine centers for up to twenty-eight days. In the US, racial prejudice claimed collateral victims through racial profiling and police brutality.¹⁰

Such instances reveal how the abuse of authority—such as by resorting to excessive force during a crisis like a pandemic—risks confusing the threat (a virus) with the victims (people). This book offers a critique of leadership that is predicated on coercion and the use of force. With the help of

¹⁰ See Malaika Jabali, “Coronavirus Policing Leads to Harsher Repercussions for Black Americans,” *The Guardian*, April 15, 2020 (www.theguardian.com); Sheryl Gay Stolberg, “‘Pandemic within a Pandemic’: Coronavirus and Police Brutality Roil Black Communities,” *New York Times*, June 7, 2020 (www.nytimes.com); and Rashid Shabazz, “We Can’t Breathe: COVID-19 and Police Injustice Are Suffocating Black People,” *The Root*, May 29, 2020 (www.theroot.com).

many examples, I will illustrate how Pope Francis prioritizes the needs of vulnerable people and how he repeatedly invites wielders of authority to exercise their political vocation as a service to solidarity, the common good, and the advancement of human dignity during and after the pandemic.

It should be said that not all regimes have been authoritarian and brutal during this time. There are several instances in which authority is exercised with caution and consideration, reminding people of the need to protect others by protecting themselves. The standard public health advice advocates almost altruistically caring for the well-being of others and thinking less of self without any added external compulsion to abide by this advice. The use of violence to enforce containment measures contrasts drastically with the strategy of appealing to moral authority. Pope Francis's style epitomizes the latter approach. There isn't the slightest hint in his messaging about coercive measures or the violent enforcement of civic restrictions on people and their physical movements. Chapter 5 also examines the moral authority of a leader as a critical asset for initiating constructive engagement across political and partisan divides in a time of crisis. Beyond engaging other leaders, to be effective, the exercise of moral authority during a crisis must raise awareness and draw attention to the values and priorities that uphold human life and rights rather than undermine them.

Fifth, the coronavirus pandemic has affected all segments of the global community without exception, including faith communities. In particular, it has generated unforeseen and unprecedented circumstances, challenges, and changes in the way Christians experience the church as a local and global community of believers. Places of worship were shuttered across the world, denying millions of adherents the opportunity to physically participate in worship celebration for an indeterminate period. Interestingly, the curtailing of sacramental and congregational worship spurred believers to discover unorthodox

spaces for communion and connection. Many have invented creative and alternative ways of celebrating and ministering using relatively affordable online tools; yet, the sudden loss of a physical community also has irked and frustrated many worshippers waiting impatiently for the COVID-19 storm to pass. The point here is that the crisis signaled a crisis for all traditions of faith. Who can forget the incredible images of a white-clad Pope Francis shuffling across the vast empty square of Saint Peter's or gazing over a deserted square from the window of the Apostolic Palace to impart a blessing (virtually) on the city and the world? These unparalleled scenes evidence the changes foisted on religious communities across the world by the pandemic. More crucially, the global public health catastrophe has raised pertinent questions within religious communities about how to lead in a time of crisis, particularly the necessity of change, flexibility, and adaptability to the circumstances and challenges forced upon them by the pandemic. Managing change, demonstrating flexibility, and adapting to a fast-moving crisis are important components of effective leadership in a time of crisis. This will be the subject of chapter 6.

Not Yet Easter

One final admission. This book is in part the outcome of a personal quest for light in the nebulous fog of a crisis. The regnant view seems to present the coronavirus crisis as a purely epidemiological event with social, economic, and political consequences. That is to say, "The coronavirus pandemic puts societies to the test: it is a test of political leadership, of national health systems, of social care services, of solidarity, of the social contract—a test of our very own fabric."¹¹ This

¹¹ Editorial, "COVID-19 Puts Societies to the Test," *The Lancet* 5 no. 5 (May 1, 2020): E235, www.thelancet.com. Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek sees the coronavirus pandemic as a triple crisis, namely, medical, economic, and psychological, in *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes*

view is partial and incomplete. In the perspective of this book, the coronavirus pandemic is also a test of faith. On a personal level, I believe that I am not alone in admitting to the fact that the coronavirus pandemic has tested the conviction of my faith, shaken the foundation of my hope, and challenged the basis of my actions as a Christian and a global citizen.

In a special moment of prayer on March 27, 2020, Pope Francis called the pandemic a “thick darkness” that “has gathered over our squares, our streets, and our cities; it has taken over our lives, filling everything with a deafening silence and a distressing void, that stops everything as it passes by; we feel it in the air, we notice in people’s gestures, their glances give them away.”¹² It was an apt assessment. Although Easter 2020 fell in the heat of the pandemic, I defiantly resolved to remain in the dark passion of the times. I felt this resolution was justifiable because as long as the cloud of COVID-19 cast a macabre shadow over hope and blighted human lives, it was not yet Easter. Until God had banished the specter of death by coronavirus, I could not sing the *Exsultet*, the traditional hymn of the resurrected Lord, with confidence and joy. Only when I began to pay close attention to the words and actions of Pope Francis in the gloom of the crisis did I begin to perceive a flicker of light and a glimmer of hope. That is why I am convinced that Francis exemplifies what good leadership looks like in a time of crisis.

Like me, people across the globe were caught amid the chaos provoked by the fear of a deadly and invisible enemy. This chaos was compounded by a cacophony of messages about the nature of the disease, a plethora of fake news promoting dubious remedies, apprehension about serious economic havoc, and the lack of a robust health care strategy. But perhaps the most influential negative factor in the current

the World (New York: Polity Press, 2020).

¹² “Extraordinary Moment of Prayer Presided Over by Pope Francis,” Friday, March 27, 2020 (www.vatican.va).

situation is the irrational, fickle, and inept leadership displayed in some parts of the world, which has led to mass discontent as citizens lose confidence in the willingness and ability of their leaders to guide them out of disaster. Francis, in contrast to some recognizably incompetent, selfish, and egotistic politicians and partisans, proffered a breath of fresh air much in character with his preferred model of prophetic and pastoral leadership. Yet he would be loath to cast himself as a hero of the coronavirus crisis. Predictably, as I show in this book, he reserves this accolade for others. A few months into his pontificate, when Italian Jesuit priest and journalist Antonio Spadaro offered Pope Francis an opportunity to toot his own horn, he retorted with a frank and disarming admission: “I am a sinner whom the Lord has looked upon.” Now in his seventh year as pope, it would seem that His Holiness has made only modest progress, judging by his admission to another journalist, Austen Ivereigh, author of *Wounded Shepherd: Pope Francis’s Struggle to Convert the Catholic Church*: “Of course I have my areas of selfishness. On Tuesdays, my confessor comes, and I take care of things there.”¹³ An honest self-awareness is an established factor of credible leadership, as I will underscore in chapter 6.

In this book, I argue that the manner in which people, communities, and societies around the world respond and adapt to a crisis depends to a considerable extent on the caliber and quality of leadership available to them. Courageous, competent, committed, conscientious, and compassionate leadership is an asset for navigating the uncertainty of crisis in order to protect and save lives. When leaders live up to their solemn responsibilities and commitments, they can be the difference between light and darkness, hope and despair, life and death for the people whom they have the privilege of serving and protecting. In the final analysis, true leadership is forged in the vicarious crucible of crisis. This in sum is the thesis of this book.

¹³ Ivereigh, “Take Care of Yourselves for a Future That Will Come,” 6.