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# Imagination

## IN THE TIME OF CORONAVIRUS

BY HANZ GUTIERREZ

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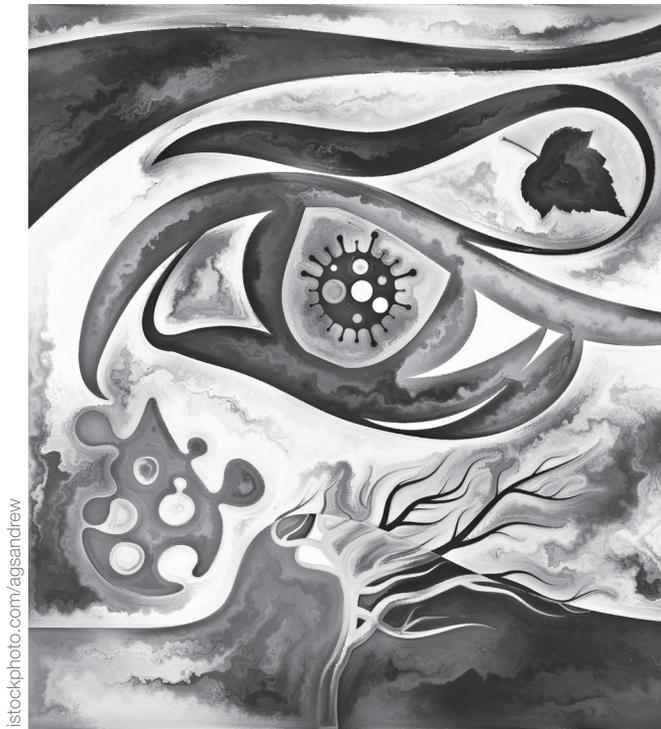
It is Florence, Italy, 1348, when the Black Death was ravaging the city, as portrayed by Giovanni Boccaccio in his famous *Decameron*'s description of plague's effect on people and places. The Black Death was the most devastating pandemic recorded in human history, resulting

in the deaths of up to 90–120 million people globally (in Eurasia and North Africa), peaking in Europe from 1347 to 1351. Whole families died. Neighborhoods were empty. In Italy, the population of Florence was reduced from 110,000–120,000 inhabitants in 1338, down to 50,000 in 1351. The average mortality rate was around 30% in the total population, while the lethality rate was around 60%. In Europe and the Mediterranean alone, the Black Death

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killed up to 50 million people, sowing fear, despair, and great uncertainty. While chaos reigned in the streets of Florence, and every friendship or kinship was broken by the plague's fear, seven young gentlewomen invited three young men to gather in the church of Santa Maria Novella, not far away from the campus of our Adventist University of Villa Aurora today, to pray and try to find out some way to face the situation. The oldest of the group, Pampinea, suggested they leave the city and thus avoid the sad vision of deaths, risk of contagion, and the lack of authority which eventually had weakened all social and moral controls.

It seemed like a good idea to get out of a city filled with contagion. There was nothing to do but watch the bodies pile up and hear the news about who died. They did not have to travel far to escape the horrors of the city, and in about two miles they reached Fiesole, a lovely hill near

Florence, where they managed to stay. These ten young people spent the next two weeks (except for four days of religious observances) improvising, creating, imagining, and telling one story per day on a chosen theme. "Ten days" (in Greek: "Decameron") for telling a hundred stories which represent the corpus of Boccaccio's narrative. A completely unexpected, unconventional, and weird way of facing a pandemic. They faced it with the "strength of imagination."

The stories are largely grouped thematically: stories of happy and unhappy love, the tricks everyone plays on everyone else, and so on. You will find here the sources of several Shakespearian plays, or episodes within them, as well as Keats's "Isabella, or The Pot of Basil" and Swift's *A Tale of a Tub*. And, of course, Boccaccio himself had taken the plots from any number of pre-existing originals. This may be one of the reasons the stories are still popular. They are part of beginning the European humanist tradition. Scorn for the clergy is a recurrent theme, and indeed Martin Luther retold the second tale, in which a Jew, curious about Christianity, goes to Rome to see how the Pope and his entourage behave. One is amazed, after reading Boccaccio's account, that no one thought to have him horribly executed. In a roundabout way, the book was an inspiration for Protestantism.

Mario Vargas Llosa's applause and praise of the *Decameron*, in his book *The Tales of the Plague* ("Los cuentos de la peste"), is based on the capacity and vision Boccaccio had to relate. Love, desire, and the power of imagination are the key factors for social resilience and change. What is unsatisfactory and impractical in daily life can be savored without guilt or consequences in those stories that remain floating in the sphere of the imaginative. In Vargas Llosa's book the plague itself takes on a metaphorical character—something that Pushkin or Albert Camus, among others, had already done—because in addition to the appalling physical agony caused by the microbe, the pandemic was accompanied by moral devastation and an absolute ruin of civilized coexistence. The revelry of the survivors between corpses and the dying, the looting of abandoned properties, contempt for the plagued, ineffectiveness and collapse of public institutions, the end of humanitarianism and empathy with others, the mutual conjugal support broken, hatred between parents and children unleashed—in sum: *sheer brutality*. All this takes over the city: evils that

emerge every time coexistence sinks due to the breakdown of social order; collective convulsions, terror, generalized violence or wars; atrocities that are embodied in the symbol of the plague as an emblem of bestiality.

These ten young people in their countryside self-quarantine are saved from the destructive effect of the plague and its psycho-social effects, Mario Vargas Llosa emphasizes, because they channel their antisocial instincts through the fictions that they tell each other. If these impulses are diverted to an imaginary plane, satisfied in fantasy, they can have the ability to preserve ethical balance and social order of their community. This is the central lesson that Vargas Llosa conveys, since irrationality and dissatisfaction can be conjured up through fiction, as in the *Decameron*, before their devastating effects on real existence are unleashed. Narration, imagination, and literature have the capacity to produce a kind of existential catharsis that keeps the worst in us under control, and at the same time opens up the best in us for fostering social resilience and change.

Even though this COVID-19 pandemic has not reached the mortality and lethality rate of the Black Death of 1350, the situation is nevertheless dramatic. At this writing around 1.5 million people have been infected and 88,538 people have now died worldwide since the outbreak was first identified at the end of 2019, according to official statistics kept by Johns Hopkins University. Italy remains the worst affected country, with 17,669 deaths so far, followed by the US where the death toll is 14,798. Spain is third-worst affected, with 14,790 deaths. But New York City alone has registered 4,685 deaths. The United Kingdom last Wednesday recorded its highest daily death toll, at 938, bringing the number of total coronavirus-linked fatalities there to 7,097.

But the health issue is not the only problem we are now facing. The United States Labor Department stated

that US jobless claims rose to 6.65 million, up from 3.3 million the previous week. Elsewhere, the latest figures from Spain, which already had one of the euro-zone's highest unemployment rates, was similarly bleak. Spain has seen almost 900,000 jobs disappear since it imposed strict measures to fight coronavirus. It is the highest monthly rise in unemployment ever recorded in the country. The economic scenario for the near future has turned apocalyptic and the recession ghost has turned real. Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair told BBC radio on Monday that he was "terrified" at the economic damage the lockdown was doing to the UK economy, estimated by the Centre for Economics and Business Research at £2.4 billion (\$2.9 billion) per day. Goldman Sachs said last Wednesday that Italy's GDP will fall 11.6% this year due to the coronavirus crisis: France's forecast is 7.4%, Germany's 8.9%, and Spain's 9.7%.

National states, public institutions, and civil communities are trying to work out the best political, social, economic, and healthcare strategies to face the situation. Will all this be both appropriate and sufficient? Certainly not. It may be appropriate but not sufficient. We also urgently need the power of imagination with the cultural attitude and human substratum it implies. Western societies, as highly rationalized groups, have become disenchanting societies and tend to leave no room for imagination in strategic decision making. At best, imagination is granted and tolerated in peripheral activities such as entertainment, sports, arts, or religion. But imagination can and should become an important part of any strategy to reconstruct our personal and common life after this destabilizing pandemic.

Consequently, we should welcome initiatives like that proposed by the Ministers of Culture and Arts of Italy (Dario Franceschini), Germany (Michelle Müntefering), and Spain (José Manuel Rodríguez Uribes), in a common

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pronouncement this week, titled “Together we are Stronger than the Virus,” where they say:

The coronavirus emergency is a stress test for the European community. Whether we choose the path of selfishness or solidarity will also decide the future of Europe ... We are painfully aware of the fact that the pandemic, which is a challenge for us all, makes no distinctions of citizenship or nationality. The virus is everyone’s invisible enemy. If we need to shut down borders and minimize physical contact in order to stem its spread, this means that in Europe we must promote and strengthen social dialogue and cohesion with even greater determination. ... And the strength of our international arts and education policy can make a substantial contribution by helping us to come together in this time of need ... It is also becoming clear that culture can offer solutions ... The many creative ideas emerging in the heart of our societies and all over Europe, are encouraging, and show us how we can overcome this period. The values of our civil society lead us to develop digital spaces for the benefit of all, as we turn away from selfishness and embrace greater solidarity. ... What would become of us in a time like this, without books, films and music in which to find refuge and support? What would our societies be without those who created them? Without artists. We are therefore even more determined to protect our most precious asset: our faith in solidarity and the power of culture.

What about Adventism? Are we an imaginative church? Are we a collaborative church? Or, are we stuck in an iron-caged identity? Are our leaders visionaries for the world or merely faithful bureaucrats of a true but idolatrous and self-referential tradition? Are we able to imagine a different world, made up not only by Adventists, and then offered to others, but rather a world made up *together with* others while we wait the coming Savior? Is the message we are offering an enchanted message of mercy and reconciliation, or it has become an obsessive and paranoid end-time warning? Do we pretend to be at

the center of the world scenario or are we still able to put the world at the center of our hearts and care? All these timely questions remain open and maybe only a renewed imagination, stimulated by this unpredictable world crisis, will help us at least understand them properly. Must we continue to wait for visionary and courageous Adventist answers?



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