

Feast of the Holy Innocents, 28 December, 2020

I offer you an excerpt from an essay by John Luo that appeared in the December 20, 2020 online version of *The New Yorker Magazine*. The essay was titled, *An Advent Lament in the Pandemic*.

“As Christians prepare anew to celebrate the Incarnation, when “the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us,” revisiting early Church history offers a reminder of the devotion to the common good that Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection can inspire. In the year 165, a horrible pandemic, sometimes referred to as the Plague of Galen, for the physician who described the illness in his writings, struck the Roman Empire. By some estimates, a quarter to a third of the population died. Nearly a century later, another pestilence devastated the region, killing as many as five thousand people a day in Rome. Dionysius, the bishop of the Church in Alexandria, where two-thirds of the population may have died, mounted a broad effort to tend to the sick. “Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another,” he wrote in an Easter letter to his flock. “Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains.” Dionysius contrasted the behavior of believers to that of pagans, who “pushed the sufferers away and fled from their dearest, throwing them into the roads before they were dead and treated unburied corpses as dirt, hoping thereby to avert the spread and contagion of the fatal disease.” Accounts of works of mercy by followers of Jesus were not limited to Christian sources. Nearly a century later, Emperor Julian, seeking to bolster paganism, urged the high priest of Galatia to emulate the charitable works of Christians, attributing the growth of the “impious Galileans” to “benevolence toward strangers and care

for the graves of the dead” and how they “support not only their poor, but ours as well.”

The historian Timothy S. Miller, in his book “[The Birth of the Hospital in the Byzantine Empire](#),” documents how the first public hospitals began to spring up in the fourth and fifth centuries as an expression of Christian charity. Basil, the bishop of Caesarea, in what is now Turkey, established a charitable complex for the destitute on the outskirts of the city that included a hostel for the sick, staffed by doctors and nurses. John Chrysostom, the archbishop of Constantinople, the new capital of the Roman Empire, opened several hospitals in that city. During the Middle Ages, hospitals were established throughout Europe, often as part of monastic communities. Charlemagne, who sought to convert all his subjects to Christianity, decreed that hospitals accompany every cathedral built in his kingdom.

In 1527, Europe experienced a resurgence of the bubonic plague, nearly two centuries after the Black Death. As victims began appearing in the German town of Wittenberg, many chose to flee. Martin Luther, a professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg and a leader of the Protestant Reformation movement, decided to stay there to care for the sick and the dying. He later wrote an open letter, “[Whether One May Flee From a Deadly Plague](#),” explaining his decision: “when people are dying, they most need a spiritual ministry which strengthens and comforts their consciences by word and sacrament and in faith overcomes death.” While he believed that no one should risk his or her life needlessly, Luther described people as being “bound to each other in such a way that no one may forsake the other in his distress but is obliged to assist and help him as he himself would like to be helped.” Along these lines, he noted that those who stayed should “take potions which can help you; fumigate house, yard, and street; shun persons

and places wherever your neighbor does not need your presence or has recovered, and act like a man who wants to help put out the burning city.” He was explicit about the need for social distancing: “I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance infect and pollute others, and so cause their death as a result of my negligence.”

In “[The Rise of Christianity](#),” Rodney Stark, a sociologist of religion, writes that the early Christians’ response to epidemics helps to explain the extraordinary spread of their movement. Rudimentary nursing, in the form of providing food and water, likely led to dramatically better survival rates among Christians and those they cared for, which would have seemed nothing short of miraculous amid so much suffering and death. Stark argues that differing mortality rates would have then begun to shift the demographics in the Roman world between Christians and pagans, and led to further conversion opportunities. He points out that Christianity provided adherents hope and consolation and that, more important, “the Christian way appeared to work.” While Stark considers a variety of other social factors, his conclusion is that the ultimate impetus for Christianity becoming the dominant faith in the Western world, a few centuries after Jesus’ birth, was the doctrines of the religion itself and the “attractive, liberating, and effective” relationships and community they produced in the early church. The Christian message of a God who loved humanity and, therefore, expected his followers to love one another—and nonbelievers, too—Stark writes, was “something entirely new” in antiquity.”

I love the idea of the “attractive, liberating, and effective” relationships and community they produced in the early church. I think that we have to look to the future with that kind of Catholic Church in mind.