

Maxim (Iuliu-Marius) MORARIU, *Gânduri de pandemie (Thoughts during the COVID-19 Pandemic)*, Renașterea Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 2020, 117 pp.

Over the past year, the word “unpredictability” has cropped up time and time again across multiple media platforms. Individuals and communities were required to adjust and reshape patterns of behavior in response to government guidelines and an ever-changing global environment. In this dreadful scenario, activities across a wide range of sectors have been put at risk due to the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. Worldwide, religious systems and rituals endured radical changes: churches had to close their doors, holidays were celebrated while social-distancing, churchgoers got in touch with live-streaming preaches and religious ceremonies (weddings, funerals) were altered in unacknowledged ways. In assent with the immemorial habit of both theological meditation and active engagement in front of catastrophes, tribulations, or diseases, our troubling times have brought forth an awakening of deep spiritual questions, but also insightful responses. In 2020, mankind had to acquaint itself with a life on pause. Books, for instance, become a sort of “social vaccination” against all the restrictions, and reading - an enjoyable process leading us towards new and gladdening editorial appearances.

Through the volume: *Thoughts during the COVID-19 Pandemic (Gânduri de pandemie)*, signed by Maxim (Iuliu-Marius) Morariu - one may easily find interrogations such as: *What does God say about trust in Him?; How can I serve God and my loved ones specifically during this difficult time?; How can I pray effectively at this time?*. The book was brought to the public eye in 2020, as a result of editorial efforts undertaken by Renașterea Publishing House located in Cluj-Napoca. Iuliu-Marius Morariu (protosinghel Maxim), a deep-toned name in research - holds a Ph.D in theology from the Faculty of Orthodox Theology at the “Babeș-Bolyai” University of Cluj-Napoca, Romania (since 2019). Currently, the prolific author is enrolled as a doctoral student at the Pontifical Angelicum University of Rome (social sciences).

The book is set-up in three parts: The first one: **I. Quarantine thoughts** - covers 11 reflections (rooted in the biblical pericopes) outlined (since the fourth Sunday of Lent until the Sunday of the Holy Fathers of the

First Council of Nicaea). Chiefly, pericopes are excerpts from the Gospels read during religious services. They seem to be divided into narratives (summing up - miracle stories, tales involving Biblical characters) along with Christological messages (proverbs, parables and rules for the parishioners to follow). In the second part: **II. Meditations dedicated to the Holy Week**, Father Maxim Morariu, in a noteworthy, eloquent fashion and in short order prompt a theological reflection upon the fragility and transitory nature of human life. These days exhort us to wait enduringly for hope to spring from our life of “social distancing” and “self-isolation”. In this manner, the author urges us to associate the Holy Week not merely with an obligation, but rather with an extraordinary opportunity, a chance to be “Christ’s road partners on the way to Golgotha” (p. 70). In order to eventually become a new creation in God, we must act in accordance with the Church, throughout time and through the world, as she joins her Bridegroom towards the most salient week in history. In the chaos of our growingly fast-paced and hectic society, Holy Week emerges as an *aide-memoire* to pause and ponder, to get closer to Christ by learning to be in service of our fellow beings and address them all from the bottom of one’s heart. As one indulges in the subjects, Father Maxim Morariu does not neglect to mention that Christianity operates as a moral compass, enabling us to cast off the garments of self-centrism and act altruistically. Taking a close look to Orthodox theology, alms-giving makes mention of the love of God toward man, which man is called to act likewise by loving his neighbor as himself. This caring nature involves not solely emotions, but requires specific acts of charity toward our fellow men in need. The third section of the volume comprises two hope-giving interviews with the author Maxim Morariu. The first one was carried out by the journalist Menuț Maximilian and the latter one by Darius Echim, collaborator at Renașterea Radio Station. Overall, the interviews gather a large-scale area of life’s challenges, opportunities and strategies to cope within the ongoing crisis, calling upon his own experiences, too. Bottom line, Father Maxim Morariu throws himself in topics such as: how COVID-19 has impacted faith, the longing for home during the outbreak of an infectious disease, the portrayal of Father Nicolae Strugaru, as an example of hospitality. Last, but not least, the author dwells on noticeable differences between the communities from Rome and Romania by resorting to a socio-religious lens.

In a general sense, Maxim Morariu’s *meditations* are alike balm to

the soul, a *manifesto* of faith and hope descending to soothe the hearts of far and wide readers. Withal, the theologian starts off by explaining the fact that by bringing to light these encouraging thoughts, he is thinking frequently about the people back home (inhabitants of the village Salva and those from Bistrița-Năsăud) by “carrying them into his heart and prayers” (p. 18). Such depth of faith in the middle of a devastating misfortune has created the possibility to take a novel approach upon the way we have been setting up our lives in the age of hyper-technology, a hint in this direction being spotted in the words: “We were summoned to reinvent our solitude, to descend into our hearts” (p. 23). This crisis serves as an irrefutable proof of a high-priority necessity to clean off the dust out of our faith resources by restoring their active nature. Overall, the book revolves around two concepts: faith and Christian love. Since the very beginning, we are encouraged to take one’s time in prayer in order to gather strength from Christ to endure the trials and afflictions of life, or, to put in a metaphorical lens, the deepest valleys of suffering, solely - as a way to escape the prison of sin. Christ is our solace and succour, thus during the dialogue established with God, stonewalls wear off substantially and the personal encounter with Jesus Christ occurs. Quite right, physically, we are separated, however, at the level of emotional interaction there are plenty of ways to come together. For instance, in the case of Romanians, the *desideratum* to engage in dialogue with a priest coupled with the augmentation of spiritual needs, may be easily seized during in 2020. In diaspora, Romanians prove to be tech-savvy, a contributing factor which strengthened the priest-parishioners bond, allowing fruitful and regular discussions. Father Maxim Morariu, draws attention that we should constantly recall the fact that the love shown by Jesus Christ on the cross attests the presence of God near us in our bone-wearily exhaustions. Christ, our “Supreme Psychologist” (p. 87), witnesses and resonates with our pain and suffering. Therefore, He embraces us with forgiveness whenever we return to Him, openly inviting us to surrender areas of anger, resentment or bitterness. For Christians, the key element that brings us together is Christ, our trustworthy friend, to Whom no form of quarantine or isolation can deny His access to our soul. In our arduous journey towards God - twists and turns help us grow in faith. Through prayer and dialogue with Christ we have the power to detach ourselves from the crowd and, on an individual ground, welcome the Guest as He triumphantly enters Jerusalem.

In 2020, all by themselves - the priests in the churches officiated the

Holy Resurrection service. The miracle of fire, a gift from the Risen Christ, descended amongst us, bringing hope. Easter declares, in all times, that the one who conquered death has now transfigured it into the servant of our joy. It is important to briefly point here - that the delight of Resurrection speaks gently to the pains carried by humanity. Whatever grief you may weep, whatever heaviness holds you down, it shall not always accompany you. Christ has shattered sin and hell. He is alive and He may settle down and be at home in our hearts "so that the anxiety that bothers us, finds solace in the life-giving silence that only he himself can emanate" (p. 85). It was an atrocious, yet hope-filled story: the Crucifixion of Christ and then an unprecedented Resurrection. Via Dolorosa was a road of skepticism, not confidence, for the disciples of Christ, but they and us have been shown that the tomb - is not a dead end, but a doorway, a door to the Truth standing roundabout between heaven and earth" (p. 89). If we turn blind towards the real significance of the Resurrection, we skip the greatest joy in the world. Persecutors, tangled events, enemies lack the ability to deprive us from this joy. The Eucharistic salvation requires an interchange of life, laying down our own life, so that we can receive His. On the whole, the most suitable term that sketches the dynamics of salvation between humanity and the Saviour of the World is "synergy," collaboration. Christ guides one not to remain trapped to the detectable, natural and material, but to explore the metaphysical dimension beyond with as much trust as living in the material world. A "Living God" will "trigger the scales of sin to fall from the eyelids of our hearts" in order to turn us into His true confessors in love and honesty. In this story of life, faith and freedom, death shows first, and then life. Blackness, and then an unshackle, untouchable Light. It is in the eye-opening events of life that the knowledge of God displays its substance and significance. The discovery of God is an endless activity. We look to Christ, Who combines in perfect proportion supreme sovereignty as well as tenderhearted mercy. Our adornment and dishes may be quite elaborate, our outfits may look flawless, our music may be outstanding, but Easter should not be mistaken with a glamorous spectacle. There is a great deal of energy running in the veins of Easter to push us beyond our luxury, and our Sunday best, and send us powerfully out in the pursuit of the One usually placed in last position on the list of events: Jesus Christ.

Father Maxim Morariu, brings to stage a new question and by this himself launches a measure of *Deus caritas est* to a stringent dilemma:

How does “solitude” and “love” *produce* “new possibilities”? True to character, underneath the theological language of the author - hangs out the obedience towards one’s neighbour and its importance in the economy of salvation. Plainly in his Christian lexicon, love sows the seeds of courageousness even in the face of instabilities. Love-hope-faith - cannot simply be pinpointed at the boundaries of life but must actually constitute the core of one’s being. It would be catastrophic to outshine the essence of God—of what God is—by disconnecting the persons of the Trinity. Although the three persons have been brought to light, separately in their respective and specific contributions in our salvation, the threefold essence of God reveals that He is a communion; He is love. He is a communion of love, an incessant wave of love and devotedness from one person to the other. Love is a dynamic interaction with an empathic and physical component, considering that “it means hugging the one next to you, giving him a warm handshake, a shoulder to cry on, to strengthen his words with a smile” (p. 34). By way of example, Saint Mary of Egypt lends us a hand to re-describe reality, to re-name experiences, or to rearrange the map of love from new angles in tormentous eras. She left in the cold her life of sin during a visit to Jerusalem and ceased to become a model of repentance. Saint Mary of Egypt got across the east bank of the Jordan River and spent the last 47 years of her existence in the Jordanian desert in communion with God. Paradoxically, she did not lose her social abilities, responding empathically towards wild animals. With this in mind, we must approach love as a theological virtue, a worthiness of the soul. Saint Mary of Egypt has rethought her love for the Others, placing the love for them in touch with God. Distance can make us cherish our loved ones more - knowing that God can help us liven up the loving nature. Also, in this equation of love, Virgin Mary turns into the Mother of the entire humanity. Committed to the temple from a tender age, her life had nothing in common with the “outward,” profane learning, but an ongoing single-mindedness, and contemplation of God. Hence, the Mother of Christ is *par excellence* the archetype for the faithful. In Her heart, Virgin Mary learned to gather pain, sadness and to express joy in solitude upon every accomplishment of her Son. Even in these bitter times, “the two-joined hearts, Mother and Son do not put an end to dialogue due to the fact that Virgin Mary has an entrustment of the Resurrection” (p. 75). The transition from fear and a deep sense of precariousness must lead us towards a “civilization of love”

(p. 113), pulling out of mothballs the intrinsic value of a human. One may not deny that the COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly been a rough time combined with contradictory emotions – and for those separated from their dearest ones, it felt quite challenging. When the longing for our beloved ones blows out of control, maybe it would not hurt, every once in a while to close our eyes and “launch a good thought toward them, an unspoken whisper of the heart in which to confess how much we appreciate them and what they mean to us” (p. 99).

Unquestionable, religious practices have been struck by the new *modus vivendi* which appeared alongside the quarantine and other public health measures in order to prevent the coronavirus spread. The book aims to reassure its readers upon the fact that the Church should be understood as the embodiment of unity through communion, a strong and living organism. Christian life finds shelter only in togetherness. Technology has been a serviceable tool in order to shrink the social gap between people. Locations and time have flaked out, literally and figuratively. After all, COVID-19 era should point itself as a meaningful lesson, a band-aid affixed upon an egomaniacal world which is invited to find ways for reconciliation and restoration of lost relationships after months of living together in distance. Each new day is a gift which we must explore with the vivid curiosity of children who gaze and explore an unknown universe step by step, or best said, a letter of love from God towards us.

Ph.D. student Iulia MEDVESCHI