

Rome, 17 March 2020

Beloved Confreres,
Dear Associate Members, Co-workers, Volunteers, and Friends,

We all entered Lent together in preparation for Easter. No one would have thought how unusual this time would be. The whole world is under the spell of the corona virus. The words of Ash Wednesday that reminded us of our human mortality resound as never before. Feelings of fear and powerlessness have gripped many. Here in Rome, where residents have been banned from leaving their homes for more than a week, this atmosphere is truly palpable. Our students in the house receive their lessons via the internet and try to keep a proper order of things. More than ever, we are experiencing the positive power of our community life, and in our praying together we feel a close connection with the many people around us. We encourage each other to follow the imposed rules closely and to see them as an expression of solidarity. We realize that any transgression or negligence can endanger others as well as ourselves. At the same time, we appreciate that we are fortunate enough to have food on the table without much worry, that we have enough room to move around in our house and garden, and above all that we have each other for support. On the other side of the street, we see families confined to their small apartments, we hear children playing on the narrow balconies, and perhaps we do not realize enough how much loneliness and desolation there currently is among the elderly, among the sick.

My thoughts particularly go out to all of you, my confreres, associate members, co-workers, volunteers, and friends, who are confronted with this world crisis in very different situations. I hope that you will find ways to be close to each other, to help and support each other in the difficult tasks you have to fulfil. In particular, I think of you who, in nursing and care for your neighbours, have to do your work with great caution and even greater dedication. May your courageous action help and encourage many to overcome their fears. Perhaps you will also have to care for people infected by the virus. Do so with care, with love, and above all with great generosity. May we actually experience the power of our charism of charity.

We especially think of our students who are now forced to stay at home, that they may find enough space there to continue their education, under the guidance of the school if need be. We think of the sick and people with disabilities in our facilities, hospitals, homes, that they may be spared from this life-threatening virus, and if they should become infected, that they may receive proper care. We think of the homeless who are now under additional threat, that they may find shelter. And we think of those who are now sick, who are in mortal danger because of the virus, that they may be helped and receive healing in their pain and suffering.

Lent is a time of prayer, fasting, and sharing. Involuntarily, we are now called upon to experience this in a very special way. That is why we want to *pray* that this pandemic

may be defeated quickly and we pray especially for those who are committed to fighting the virus in various fields: through scientific research and through direct help and care. Throughout this month, we pray specifically to Saint Joseph, so that he may continue to show his care, which was so telling to Mary and Jesus, and now also to us and to all who have been affected by the virus.

It is a moment when we may rediscover the meaning of *fasting*, and through mortification we may connect spiritually with our neighbours who are having a very hard time right now. It may become a very special intention in our fasting and mortification.

And finally, we want to *share*. Let us not remain insensitive when we are asked to effectively offer support.

I would like to conclude with a prayer and I would like to share what we received from the Belgian Bishops' Conference.

*"God of all life,
from time immemorial You have shown the people your love.
In Jesus, your Son, You came very near to us.
He brought healing and peace to the sick,
by his goodness and reconciliation
He opened up a new future
to people who were lost.
Come meet us with the Spirit that animated Jesus,
in these days of turmoil and uncertainty.
Grant us calmness, wisdom, and courage
to discern what we can do
to support others
and help overcome this crisis.
Make us grow in hope and confidence
now that we all experience our vulnerability so strongly,
and keep the faith alive in us
that You may work all things for good.
Through Christ, our Lord. Amen."*

Fraternally yours in the Lord,



Bro. René Stockman
Superior General
Brothers of Charity