

IN the world NOT OF the world

Pastoral Letter 2020



Bishop Paul Hinder OFM Cap.

“IN THE WORLD, NOT OF THE WORLD”

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To all the faithful in the
Apostolic Vicariates of Northern and Southern Arabia

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*“I am not asking you to take them out of the world,
but I ask you to protect them from the evil one.”
(John 17:15)*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Peace be with you!

1. We are all passing through a difficult time since the Covid-19 pandemic has troubled our life in many ways. I wish to share with you some reflections, taking as my starting point a word from John’s gospel. We find it in the long prayer of Jesus on the evening of the Last Supper. After washing the feet of his disciples and before entering into his Passion, Jesus addresses the Father and prays for his disciples: “I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one.” (John 17:15)

Placed amidst the real world

2. Jesus does not foresee that his disciples will live in an ideal world but rather in the one affected by sin. As Christians, we have to live in the world as it is and not as we may sometimes wish it to be. We dramatically experience this reality during this time of the Covid-19 pandemic. To believe in Jesus Christ and to be a member of his Church does not automatically place us into a paradise. We are neither saved from Covid-19 nor from other calamities simply because we believe in the Lord. Like everybody else, we are

exposed to the risks that exist in a contaminated world. We cannot pretend that we can expect special treatment from God in this regard only because we believe in his Son, Jesus Christ. In his prayer before the Passion, Jesus does not ask the Father to take his disciples out of the world. He only asks the Father “to protect them from the evil one”. “The evil one” does not refer to sickness, accident, famine, war and similar adversities, but to the devil who can take us into his grip, make our soul fatally sick, and cut us off from friendship with God.

3. Of course, we all hope and pray to come out of the pandemic unharmed. But there is no guarantee – neither for the believer nor for the unbeliever. In this regard, we all share the same basic condition and must do what is needed to protect ourselves and others in the most effective way. We are grateful to all those who are working day and night to minimize the deadly risks and who are searching intensively for the vaccine which will hopefully restore some security. However, the present pandemic reminds us, in a rather striking way, that Christians share with all other human beings the “common home” that God the Creator has given us. The pandemic does not make any distinction between believers and unbelievers.
4. Yet the question remains: how should we Christians deal with this situation? What are the answers to the questions that trouble our minds and may cause a lot of doubt in our hearts? Looking back in history, we see right from the beginning, that Christians had to learn by painful experience what it

meant to be in the world but not of the world. The followers of Jesus Christ were often exposed to an environment that was everything but friendly to the new faith of the Christians. However, the faithful did not withdraw from the society in which they lived nor did they fall into a collective self-pity. Rather, we find that from the early times, Christians committed themselves to the public and social life, often risking their own lives. In their external appearance, they did not segregate themselves from among the people they belonged to; but the way in which they lived amidst a pagan (and in many regards, immoral) society was different.

Called to be the “soul” to the world

5. To enter into the above point in some depth, I wish to quote a longer passage from an ancient text which was written around 130–160 years after the death of Christ. The text, which takes the form of a letter addressed to a man called Diognetus, gives us a picture that we can easily adapt to our situation. Speaking about the life of the Christians amidst the world at that time, the author writes as follows:

“ Christians are indistinguishable from other men either by nationality, language or customs. They do not inhabit separate cities of their own, or speak a strange dialect, or follow some outlandish way of life. Their teaching is not based upon reveries inspired by the curiosity of men. Unlike some other people,

they champion no purely human doctrine. With regard to dress, food and manner of life in general, they follow the customs of whatever city they happen to be living in, whether it is Greek or foreign.

And yet there is something extraordinary about their lives. They live in their own countries as though they were only passing through. They play their full role as citizens, but labour under all the disabilities of aliens. Any country can be their homeland, but for them their homeland, wherever it may be, is a foreign country. Like others, they marry and have children, but they do not expose them. They share their meals, but not their wives.

They live in the flesh, but they are not governed by the desires of the flesh. They pass their days upon earth, but they are citizens of heaven. Obedient to the laws, they yet live on a level that transcends the law. Christians love all men, but all men persecute them. Condemned because they are not understood, they are put to death, but raised to life again. They live in poverty, but enrich many; they are totally destitute, but possess an abundance of everything. They suffer dishonour, but that is their glory. They are defamed, but vindicated. A blessing is their answer to abuse, deference their response to insult. For the good they do they receive the punishment of malefactors, but even then, they rejoice, as though receiving the gift of life... *(From a letter to Diognetus)*

6. This witness from ancient times shows us that Christians did not separate themselves in a sectarian way from the world and society in which they lived. Rather, what distinguished them was their way of life. In a culture where people worshipped power and even treated the Emperor as a god, Christians said that their lives and worship belonged only to the true God. This was not negotiable for them, even if they were killed for this belief. In a society where abortion and killing of babies after their birth was common practice, they kept holy the fruit of the womb. In a culture where sexual promiscuity was a common practice, they insisted in word and practice on the exclusivity of the matrimonial bond. In an age when discrimination of people was part of the system, Christians considered themselves as brothers and sisters independently of their social and economic status, or their linguistic or cultural belonging. The reality may not always have corresponded to the ideal. However, the seed of a totally different lifestyle – rooted in the example and the word of Jesus Christ – was spread and produced fruit. Amidst their struggles, Christians were proud of their identity. They were convinced that although small in number, they could change the world. Let us listen again to the same letter to Diognetus:

“ To speak in general terms, we may say that the Christian is to the world what the soul is to the body. As the soul is present in every part of the body, while remaining distinct from it, so Christians are found in all the cities of the world but cannot be identified with the world. As the visible body contains the invisible

soul, so Christians are seen living in the world, but their religious life remains unseen. The body hates the soul and wars against it, not because of any injury the soul has done it, but because of the restriction the soul places on its pleasures. Similarly, the world hates Christians, not because they have done it any wrong, but because they are opposed to its enjoyments.

Christians love those who hate them just as the soul loves the body and all its members despite the body's hatred. It is by the soul, enclosed within the body, that the body is held together, and similarly, it is by the Christians, detained in the world as in a prison, that the world is held together. The soul, though immortal, has a mortal dwelling place; and Christians also live for a time amidst perishable things, while awaiting the freedom from change and decay that will be theirs in heaven. As the soul benefits from the deprivation of food and drink, so Christians flourish under persecution. Such is the Christian's lofty and divinely appointed function, from which he is not permitted to excuse himself. (*From a letter to Diognetus*)

Resisting the temptation to conform to the world

7. Sometimes I wonder if we, unlike those early Christians, are no longer proud of our identity as Catholics. Perhaps this is because of the undisputable scandals that happened (and still unfortunately happen) among us and within the

Church. Paralyzed by such shocks, we are no longer able to live with the serenity and hope that Saint Paul expresses in his letter to the Philippians: “Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead. I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind” (Phil 3:13–15). While we must address the mistakes of the past, we are called to live the Good News of our Lord Jesus Christ with courage in the present. Facing the challenges of today’s world, we have to avoid paths that lead us astray. One error would exist in withdrawing from the society around us and hiding in our own religious ghetto as certain groups tend to do. Such people live separately from the society and satisfy themselves as critical observers or even judges of the world. The other error would be to melt into the surrounding world and to behave as everybody else, regardless of whether such behaviour is good or bad. We would lose our Christian identity. Jesus warns us: “If salt loses its taste, with what can it be seasoned? It is no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot” (Mt 5:13). Neither of the two paths are truly Christian. Jesus wanted us to be “light(s) of the world” (Mt 5:14) and “salt of the earth” (Mt 5:13). And he wanted us to be these things amidst the world. That is why Jesus prayed for us before his Passion: “I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.” (John 17:15–17) Therefore, while we live as everybody else in this world, we do so with a clear

difference: we live as people who are “sanctified in the truth”. Being sanctified in the truth means to be made holy by the One who said, “I am the truth” (Jn 14:6).

8. Saint Paul confronts Christians with this task when he writes to the Romans: “Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom 12:2). We know from our own experience how easily we become conformed to this world instead of being transformed through the renewal of our minds. We live in a world where the powerful whirlpool of moral and doctrinal relativism can easily draw us away from following the path of God’s commandments. Pope Francis speaks very often about this risk. I refer as an example to his morning homily at Santa Marta on February 13, 2020. He spoke about King Solomon who in his great wisdom was not preserved from going astray. The great king began as a “good boy” who asked the Lord for wisdom and received it. But Solomon’s heart became weak because he allowed his wives, who served other gods, to convince him to adore their idols. “His was not an apostasy from one day to the next”, Pope Francis pointed out. He slid into sin. The Lord rebuked Solomon for being led astray: “You turned away your heart”. This also occurs in our lives. Most of us do not commit great sins but the danger lies in “letting ourselves slide slowly because it is an anaesthetized fall”. Without realizing it, things become relativized and we lose our faithfulness to God. How “often (do) we forget the Lord and begin to deal with other gods”

such as money, vanity and pride! “For us”, Pope Francis explained, “this slippery slide in life is directed towards worldliness” believing it is alright because “everyone is doing it”. As we justify ourselves in this way, we lose our faithfulness to God and embrace modern idols. (*L’Osservatore Romano, Weekly Edition in English, n.12, 20 March 2020*)

9. What happened to Solomon can happen to anyone of us. We often want to please everybody and make their gods our gods. If we do not have the strength from inside, from “God’s love that has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit” (Rom 5:5), we shall lose the battle. We know well that instead of being transformed, we can easily risk being conformed! For example, everybody tells lies, why should I always tell the truth? Everybody cheats, why should I not do the same? Whoever remains faithful to his or her spouse is seen as a fool, therefore why should I too not go astray? And when we come to the questions of faith, it is similar. There are so many theories about Jesus Christ, why still believe in the antiquated words of the Creed? Would it not be better to follow an eloquent preacher who may even mock the Catholic Church with all its scandals? Everybody follows his or her own interest, why should I care about others? The list of such examples could be multiplied ad infinitum.

How to live a detached life

10. The question remains: how can we preserve our Christian identity in a world that follows values quite different from

our own, without separating ourselves from it? This question must bother every well-intended Christian. This point has come up in the texts and speeches of the Popes in the recent past. On the occasion of his visit to Germany, Pope Benedict XVI spoke to Catholics about this topic (*25 September 2011 in Freiburg*). He provoked harsh reactions which proves that he touched an open wound not only in the life of the Catholics in Germany, but also in other parts of the world. I am quoting some substantial passages of his speech:

“ In order to accomplish her true task adequately, the Church must constantly renew the effort to detach herself from her tendency towards worldliness and once again to become open towards God. ... History has shown that, when the Church becomes less worldly, her missionary witness shines more brightly. Once liberated from material and political burdens and privileges, the Church can reach out more effectively and in a truly Christian way to the whole world, she can be truly open to the world. She can live more freely her vocation to the ministry of divine worship and service of neighbour. ... It is not a question here of finding a new strategy to relaunch the Church. Rather, it is a question of setting aside mere strategy and seeking total transparency, not bracketing or ignoring anything from the truth of our present situation, but living the faith fully here and now in the utterly sober light of day, appropriating it completely, and stripping away from it anything that only seems to belong to faith, but in truth is mere convention or

habit. To put it another way: for people of every era, and not just our own, the Christian faith is a scandal. That the eternal God should know us and care about us, that the intangible should at a particular moment have become tangible, that he who is immortal should have suffered and died on the Cross, that we who are mortal should be given the promise of resurrection and eternal life – for people of any era, to believe all this is a bold claim. ... It is time once again to discover the right form of detachment from the world, to move resolutely away from the Church's worldliness. This does not, of course, mean withdrawing from the world: quite the contrary. A Church relieved of the burden of worldliness is in a position, not least through her charitable activities, to mediate the life-giving strength of the Christian faith to those in need, to sufferers and their carers ... As individuals and as the community of the Church, let us live the simplicity of a great love, which is both the simplest and hardest thing on earth because it demands no more and no less than the gift of oneself."

Living amidst the challenges of the pandemic

11. "In the world, not of the world" remains a challenge for the Church and her members at all times. The present pandemic has the potential to awaken us from the sleep of false security. We may have taken too many things for granted, not only regarding our daily human needs but also regarding our lives as the faithful and members of the Church. In the space of almost a single day, most of

us were cut off from the weekly or daily Mass, from the celebration of the other sacraments, from visiting the sick and from burying the dead. The physical quarantine was forcing us to a spiritual quarantine. Suddenly we were obliged to ask ourselves about the essentials of our life: not only about the daily bread with its material aspects, but also about our trust in God who did not answer our prayers as we may have expected. Many have suddenly experienced the fate of Job: “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away.” Were we, and are we, also able to say with Job, “Blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21)?

- 12.** We are happy that the worship places and with them also our churches can reopen in most of the countries of our region, though with restrictions. However, everybody can feel that it is no longer the same as before. The rules imposed because of the risks of Covid-19 are changing the character of our celebrations. Social distancing, frequent sanitizing, wearing masks and gloves, regulations regarding singing, limiting the celebration time and many other things make it more difficult to experience the joy of the liturgy and the feeling that we are remembering the great redemptive deeds God has done for us through his Son Jesus Christ. Celebration of our essential sacraments like Baptism, Confirmation or Marriage with only a small group of participants, makes us drastically feel that life is no more the same as before. The fact that individual confession is possible only in a very reduced way with social distance shows us that the normality of sacramental life has disappeared. The strict rules for visiting the sick in the hospitals or at home make the administering of the anointing of the sick, an action

emptied of the touch of human warmth and closeness. Even the blessing of bodies and funerals have become ordeals which very often leave the mourning family members and friends feeling frustrated. The reduced accessibility of the churches has deprived and is still depriving many faithful of the place where they can silently bring to the Lord their sorrows or weep in front of Mother Mary.

Adapting to new conditions

13. All these experiences and many more make us aware that living the faith in community is more than fulfilling certain acts which we consider as an obligation for a practising Catholic. In the absence of normal relationships with our fellow-believers, we realize that being one body is not only the sum total of some isolated religious exercises, but also a reality that has to be taken care of actively. How we can do this in an effective way under the given circumstances will be one of the main challenges we have to address. Certainly, we have the electronic means which help us to reach out to others. We shall continue to broadcast liturgies and other religious activities online and to share the word of God in many ways. However, we need physical contact, because as human persons and believers we are beings with body and soul. Our innermost being is at risk of being dried out if the experience of real community is lacking. Imagine a family where everybody lives in his or her own room, eats their meals there and communicates only virtually with the other members: such a family would undergo a drought in

their relationship! It is similar to our life as Christians in the community of our parishes and their different groups.

14. Covid-19 has the potential to physically kill infected people. But beyond that, it has also the potential to damage and even kill true human relationships. Elderly people, the chronically ill, persons with special needs and so on are declared as persons at risk and excluded from normal social life. In the present climate of fear of infection, there is the risk of seeing the other person as a threat to our own health and vice versa. It will be our task as Christians to do everything that is in our power to fight against a general climate of suspicion and exclusion. Normal healthcare and prudence, yes; hysteria and excessive concern, no! Of course, we are bound by the rules of the civil authorities. However, we should not take these rules as an excuse for our lack of mutual care as members of the same Christian community and the basic human family.

Confidence versus panic

15. We are, as Jesus said, fully “in this world” but not “of this world”. What does this mean in the specific context we are living in? As I mentioned at the beginning of this letter, we share with all our fellow humans the same living conditions, including the risks and the fears of the pandemic and many other threats. The question is how we cope with this situation as believers in Jesus Christ. He taught us to understand ourselves as sons and daughters of the

heavenly Father who loves us through and through. Does this mean that we have always a happy life? No! However, it means that even in situations of distress and utmost trials we do not fall out of his hands. It is Jesus who in his life and death showed this truth, when he said before breathing his last: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46). Saint Paul, who had to suffer a lot during his lifetime, hammered into the hearts of the Romans the truth of God’s love in Christ Jesus with the following words: “Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom:8:35.38-39). We tremble and suffer with all the other humans, but we believe that there is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who will not abandon us, not even in death. The risen Lord is the warrant for this conviction.

16. During the very moving “Urbi et Orbi” prayer on 27 March 2020, Pope Francis challenged our faith with the words of Jesus addressed to his disciples in the situation of the sea-storm:

““ Why are you afraid? Have you no faith”? Faith begins when we realise we are in need of salvation. We are not self-sufficient; by ourselves we are lost: we need

the Lord like ancient navigators needed the stars. Let us invite Jesus into the boats of our lives. Let us hand over our fears to him so that he can conquer them. Like the disciples, we will experience that with him on board there will be no shipwreck. Because this is God's strength: turning to the good everything that happens to us, even the bad things. He brings serenity into our storms, because with God life never dies.

- 17.** The Lord asks us and, in the midst of our tempest, invites us to reawaken and put into practice that solidarity and hope capable of giving strength, support and meaning to these hours when everything seems to be floundering. The Lord awakens so as to reawaken and revive our Easter faith. We have an anchor: by his cross we have been saved. We have a rudder: by his cross we have been redeemed. We have a hope: by his cross we have been healed and embraced so that nothing and no one can separate us from his redeeming love. In the midst of isolation when we are suffering from a lack of tenderness and chances to meet up, and we experience the loss of so many things, let us once again listen to the proclamation that saves us: he is risen and is living by our side. The Lord asks us from his cross to rediscover the life that awaits us, to look towards those who look to us, to strengthen, recognize and foster the grace that lives within us. Let us not quench the wavering flame (cf. Is 42:3) that never falters, and let us allow hope to be rekindled. (*Extraordinary Prayer presided over by Pope Francis, 27 March 2020*)

Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith

18. Dear Brothers and Sisters! In this situation of distress, let us not commit the mistake of Lot's wife who looked back to the burning city of Sodom and "became a pillar of salt" (Gen 19:26). We have to accept reality as it is and look forward, knowing that "our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Phil 3:20). This does not resolve the daily problems that we have to face. However, it gives us the horizon of hope amidst the calamities of this world. The letter to the Hebrews even gives a whole list of witnesses of faith to encourage an early Christian community suffering persecution and fatigue (cf. Hebrews 11). After this "cloud of witnesses" the letter to the Hebrews continues: "Let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:1-2). "Looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith" is our challenge when we have to go forward and live under the permanent threats of pandemics, wars, economic problems and other adversities in our individual lives.

19. In such situations, the best thing that we can give to each other is the message and witness of hope. It makes no sense to complain daily about our bad experiences. We are called to "forget what lies behind and strain forward to

what lies ahead” (Phil 3:13). It is the perspective of a life that looks beyond the daily struggles to “the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:14). This will be the test if we truly understand the prayer of Jesus before his passion: “I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:15–17). To be sanctified in the truth means to look to Jesus as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith and not let the struggles we have to pass through limit our horizon.

20. Looking “to Jesus as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” has to take flesh in our charitable initiatives. Without making a big noise, there are many showing genuine Gospel charity during this time of the pandemic. They are helping neighbours and others in difficult times. I wish to thank all of them, including those who in their professional activity are working at the forefront. I encourage individuals and groups in our parishes to continue on the way of charitable solidarity within the Christian community. Let us be aware of the strong words Saint James uses in his letter: What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well,” but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it? So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead (James 2:14–17).

Sacramental life under extraordinary conditions

21. We are soon starting a new school year and will reorganize our pastoral and educational activities. Many things will look very different compared to the past. However, we shall work together, and with the grace of God, we will make the best out of a difficult situation. It will require patience when we have to plan the timetable of the Masses, the celebration of the sacraments in small groups (Baptisms, First Communions, Confirmations, Marriages), the Catechism in limited groups and using online media etc. However, I am sure that we have among us a lot of charisms which will help us to face the challenges. Each member of the faithful, not only the priests and religious, has received by baptism and confirmation the faculty and the mandate to be a co-builder of Christ's body. Everyone who relates to others in daily life in true Christian love can help to develop spiritual bonds between families and groups. We have to overcome a mentality in which we are turning around ourselves and within our small circles. This is the main reason why I started the process of major lay involvement in the UAE and in Oman, although the pandemic has put a temporary break on the process. I am sure that the Holy Spirit empowers us to do what is required and possible in the present situation. We go forward with the confidence that is given to each one who keeps looking at Jesus the Lord, who is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

- 22.** As I wrote earlier, it will not be possible for the time being to resume all the sacramental activities. Most of you will not have the possibility to go to one of the so-called “Obligation Masses”. As long as the present situation of the pandemic with its restrictions lasts, the Sunday obligation to attend Mass remains suspended, along with the canonical obligations for the yearly confession and Easter Communion. However, the obligation to worship God on Sunday can never be suspended. Even if you cannot attend Mass, there remains the obligation that every baptized person should still devote some special time to prayers of thanksgiving, adoration and intercession on every Sunday. We shall also take care, that those who cannot go to church can follow, either alone or with their families, or small groups, the services which are broadcast live on the internet, which will continue in many of our parishes.
- 23.** Read the Bible. Pray the Rosary. Learn by heart key verses of the Gospels and of the Psalms as a spiritual treasure for times of drought. As the Sacrament of Reconciliation will be administered only in a limited way, I have given permission to the priests to celebrate a penitential rite with general absolution before certain masses. I once again advise the priests of the requirement to let the faithful know, sufficiently in advance, the days of the month when the general absolution will be given. When and how the other sacraments can be administered has to be sorted out according to the situation in the respective country, emirate and parish. The priests are given a certain number of rules by the bishop to facilitate the procedures.

God is with us at dusk and in the morning

24. I wish to finish this letter with the last verse of the prayer poem of the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He wrote it to his loved ones from prison a few months before his martyrdom under the Nazis which happened exactly 75 years ago. The verse may fit well into the life of many among us:

*By loving forces wonderfully sheltered,
we are awaiting fearlessly what comes.
God is with us at dusk and in the morning
and most assuredly on every day.*

May the Spirit lead each one of us to understand in a deeper way the mystery, that we live in this world but we are not of this world. May the realisation of this truth bring us the inner freedom to live with serenity the challenges of the coming months and years.

I invoke upon all of you through the intercession of Our Lady of Arabia, the protection of our Lord Jesus Christ who has promised his disciples that he will remain with us until the end of time (cf. Mt 28:20).

With my blessings to all of you,

+PAUL HINDER OFM CAP.

Apostolic Vicar of Southern Arabia

Apostolic Administrator of Northern Arabia

Abu Dhabi, 6th August 2020 (The Transfiguration of the Lord)



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