

Do not wash your hands from Democracy, Human Rights and the Rule of Law in COVID-19 Times

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Whilst the physical world around us continues to look, feel, smell and sound pretty much as it always has, a seismic shift has silently happened. A minute virus has got human society the world over in its grip, and almost overnight changed the way we are asked to live, move and have our being on this planet.

For me personally, after squeezing in an urgent trip to one chaplaincy in early March, even as the lockdown loomed, it has meant that all further visits to our congregations in my far-flung area of responsibility for our Diocese in Europe have had to be cancelled. Like countless others I have joined the home-office workforce via video conferencing and indirect communication. Otherwise I have been in a safe, good place, though missing the face-to-face contact.

For the majority of my fellow citizens in Europe, however, the silent invasion by the virus and the 'new normal' hit them with unprecedented and unimaginable effect, physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually: we think of the aged self-isolating in confined living accommodation; the children barred from going to school and meeting their playmates; the parents juggling with home-office and child-minding; the underemployed and unemployed or those whose means of livelihood dropped away – all as a result of the lockdown; not least to mention the under-equipped and over-stressed medical and care personnel. We are keenly aware of social and cultural life as it was, having come to a sudden standstill. Adding to the fluidity and uncertainty of the past four months is the fact that scientists, politicians and other opinion shapers have had to make decisions on the basis of inadequate and rapidly changing facts and figures about the virus and how it operates. Even as the lockdown is being eased, our uncertainty remains. Much of what we could previously take for granted or at least lay claim to, has under Covid19 circumstances been restricted and prohibited leading to impingements on our rights as individuals in the free world. The task, therefore, of CEC to take up the EU call to reflect on the interface between national responses to the Covid-19 pandemic and human rights and rule of democratic law, is most welcome.

My contribution to this discussion is to present an Anglican perspective. What this can be in such an evolving situation is to share what we in our church here on the continent have faced, how we have responded and what we have learned from these experiences.

The Church of England chaplaincies in Europe each have the dual identity of being subject to the rule of law in the host country and of practicing their faith in accordance with the traditions, the tenets and the liturgy of the Church of England. Central to their practice is the weekly Sunday gathering for a service of Holy Communion. Apart from the devotional practice, spiritual support and inspiration for which worshippers come to church, they could expect a time of social interchange after the service, an important feature of Anglican Church life. With Covid19 appearing in our midst, this coming together had to stop overnight, as also the central act of sharing the Lord's Supper or Eucharist. Here we could already point to an erosion of personal freedom and the right to practice one's religion. In actual fact, however, I am not aware of any chaplaincy raising this as an issue. Instead, chaplaincies across the board quickly concentrated on defining what they understood to be their inalienable duty to God and the community under the new circumstances. They have accepted the Eucharistic fast. They explored and devised ways and means of continuing to 'gather' for worship and study and even

offer 'coffee hours' electronically. Pastoral support, both material and spiritual to those in need was high on the priority of clergy and those lay persons with parish responsibilities. The bishops in the diocese provided timely guidance, and the archdeacons kept in close touch, offering advice to chaplains, wardens and others as needed. It was a joy to see how individual congregations creatively used streamed or pre-recorded worship, often joining in with services in other European countries or in England. Friends of chaplaincies living elsewhere have been able to link into a service in their former congregations. The crisis has, in a number of contexts, brought about closer ecumenical working relationships where the same building is shared, but also in terms of consultation and joint responses. Within all this the pain of not being free to meet physically in the accustomed sacred space and engage in the central practices of faith remains. Nonetheless, people have generally accepted that these measures are firstly, necessary in the interests of the wellbeing of all; secondly, that they are only temporary suspensions of valued personal rights; thirdly, that they are directed by recognized temporal and religious authorities, and fourthly, that these measures are implemented not simply by decree, but democratically and by appealing to every individual's sense of responsibility for the common good. A close friend of our family, who has over time developed a critical antenna towards 'the church', to my surprise volunteered the opinion that the response of 'the church' to the Covid19 crisis was impressive!

It is, however, also true to say that in this 'new normal' under Covid19 there was a growing uneasy awareness among the general public that the 'freedoms' we have taken for granted can be suddenly and radically challenged. The debate was set in motion on how far the suspension of these freedoms, even temporarily, could go and where they must be countered by the right to exercise such freedoms. Increasing discontent was becoming self-evident especially among the younger population, to some extent understandably so. We saw political groupings known for their ideologically anti-democratic platforms attempting to foment protests against the restrictions democratically elected governments had imposed. The wearing of protective facemasks, for example, became a major issue of infringed personal freedom. Instead, and in keeping with Christian and democratic value of every human life, masks can also be regarded as the symbol of shared responsibility for one another. Despite problems, strained relationships and insecurity which many of our chaplaincies confronted among their members on the one hand, and the well-organized internet communication they exercised on the other, in my observation they were not hotbeds in which conspiracy theories thrived. They could be counted amongst a stable consensus that such an emergency called for stringent measures to protect lives.

The awareness for the needs of others in one's own neighbourhood grew. Till today it finds ever new and creative ways of strengthening community and finding alternative experiences of the arts. Undeserved hardship became apparent and often came close in terms of it striking ones-self or those near and dear. Media reports on how diverse governments in Europe and the world over responded to the Covid-19 pandemic vividly brought into our sitting rooms the plight of people around the globe, and it became clearer by the day that the 'democratic' virus which was said to be no respecter of persons, primarily struck down those most disadvantaged, those living in poverty and those without access to the best medical care. Limitations of qualified personnel, adequate treatment space, sophisticated equipment and health care coverage all threw a glaring light on the reality that the poorest and most marginalized are generally the most susceptible. Hopefully, such facts continue to serve as a reminder, that some of our so valued human rights were already and permanently suspended or under stress in many parts worldwide, even before Covid19 conditions were anywhere imposed.

In the midst of such a volatile situation the death of George Floyd at the hands of police officers happened on 25th May in Minneapolis. We have not just the terrible incident but also the emerging protests and reactions under the flag of Black Lives Matter in our mind's eye. In other parts of the Western world solidarity protests followed. Whilst any violent expressions cannot be condoned, the

point I want to make here is: The fundamental human rights of the Afro-American community have over centuries been trodden underfoot in a model democracy. The cry for justice was picked up by ethnic minority groups also in Europe and supported by indigenous compatriots. How long have we too been blind in one eye to latent racism in our communities which almost as a matter of course impinges on the human rights of those of other or mixed ethnic origins? If we are serious about the protection of human rights, there are many contexts the world over where these could be addressed but are not.

In the words of The Rt Revd Robert Innes, Bishop of the Church of England Diocese in Europe, 'there remains far more to do to encourage minority ethnic ministry and representation'. He has commissioned a working group to look into the policies and strategies of the diocese in this area 'as a matter of urgency'. It is one example of how churches in Europe can respond - late, but better than never - in a long-standing human rights issue. The churches are called to be the conscience of society and show the way.

I conclude with a phrase by a former German chancellor, Willy Brandt: 'mehr Demokratie wagen' (risk more democracy). In an atmosphere where democratic values are being challenged and even slowly but steadily eroded, there is indeed need to urge the leadership in our European countries - political, religious, in the business world and the media - to enable democracy to breathe freely again. All of us are called to accompany this process peacefully, but with determination. The suspension of human rights under Covid-19 should be guided by the strictly checked maxim to serve the protection of human lives and to limit its destructive fallout in the fabric of human societies. Such a strategy will allow democracy to breathe and human rights to be worked for.