

From the Chapel – April 21: Nothing new under the sun



[“From the Chapel”](#) is a series of short, daily reflections on life and faith in a time of uncertainty. As people across the world cope with the effects of the coronavirus – including the social isolation necessary to combat its spread – these reflections remind us of the hope that lies at the heart of the Gospel.

Americans may be politically divided, especially in a presidential election year, but there’s one thing that we all seem to agree on: Whenever something happens to us or our country, it’s unprecedented. Forget Ecclesiastes: Everything is new under the American sun.

On Easter Sunday, I pulled down off the shelf in my library my dog-eared copy of *I Promessi Sposi* (“The Betrothed”), Alessandro Manzoni’s 1827 masterpiece. I’ve mentioned before that [“The Betrothed” is Pope Francis’ favorite novel](#) (which is proof that he’s really an Italian rather than an Argentinian, no matter what his birth certificate says).

Pope Francis has referred to “The Betrothed” on a few different occasions during this pandemic. That’s because the chapters near the end of the novel are set in and around Milan during the plague of 1630. You may have heard references to Cardinal Carlo (Charles) Borromeo and how he dealt with the plague during his time as cardinal-archbishop of Milan – closing churches, suspending public Masses and constructing stages in the piazzas of Milan to hold Masses that the Milanese could watch from the safety of their own homes.

That plague, which is mentioned in “The Betrothed,” was 54 years earlier than the one described in the novel’s later

chapters. In 1630, another Borromeo – Federico, Carlo's cousin – was cardinal-archbishop of Milan. Like Carlo, Federico took the plague seriously, when too many of the people of Milan did not. Manzoni writes that "he sent out a pastoral letter to the parish priests, instructing them, among other things, to impress on the people as often as possible the importance of reporting all cases of the kind, and the strict obligation to hand in any infected or suspect personal effects for destruction."

Meanwhile, "Anyone who mentioned the danger of the pestilence, whether in the streets, the shops or in private houses – anyone who even mentioned the word 'plague' – was greeted with incredulous mockery or angry contempt." The two doctors who had first tried to convince Milan's commission of health that the plague was real "became the butt of popular indignation and were regarded as enemies of their country."

But they weren't alone: "A share of that odium fell on certain other doctors who were also convinced that this really was the plague, and consequently suggested precautions and tried to convince everyone else of the appalling truth. The more discreet of their fellow citizens accused them of nothing more than credulity and obstinacy; the others regarded it as a blatant imposture, a conspiracy designed to make capital out of the fear of the public."

The plague, of course, was real, and thousands would die in and around Milan – the very places where, today, thousands are dying from COVID-19. But even as deaths began to mount, the reality of the plague wasn't accepted by everyone. Milan's chief physician, "then nearly 80 years old," a man respected, loved and admired, went out one day, and "a crowd began to gather round him, shouting that he was the ringleader of those who wanted there to be a plague at all costs, and that he was the one who was terrifying the whole city ... and all to improve business for the doctors. ... This was his reward for having judged things correctly, spoken the truth, and tried to save

many thousands of people from the plague.”

The public authorities dragged their feet, losing a month, during which time the plague moved from the countryside into the city. Eventually, of course, the reality of the plague could not be ignored, but that didn't mean that it couldn't be explained away. As Manzoni sums it up: “In the beginning, then, there had been no plague, no pestilence, none at all, not on any account. The very words had been forbidden.

“Next came talk of ‘pestilent fever’ – the idea being admitted indirectly, in adjectival form.

“Then it was ‘not a real pestilence’ – that is to say, it was a pestilence, but only in a certain sense; not a true pestilence, but something for which it was difficult to find another name.

“Last of all, it became a pestilence without any doubt or argument – but now a new idea was attached to it, the idea of poisoning and witchcraft, and this corrupted and confused the sense conveyed by the dreaded word which could now no longer be suppressed.”

Of course, the idea that anyone would think that a plague was the result of “poisoning and witchcraft” is laughable, especially in our day of such scientific advances as vaccines and microchips and 5G. We've come a long way, baby, over the last 390 years.

“What has been, that will be; what has been done, that will be done. Nothing is new under the sun!” (Ecclesiastes 1:9).

Scott P. Richert is publisher for OSV.