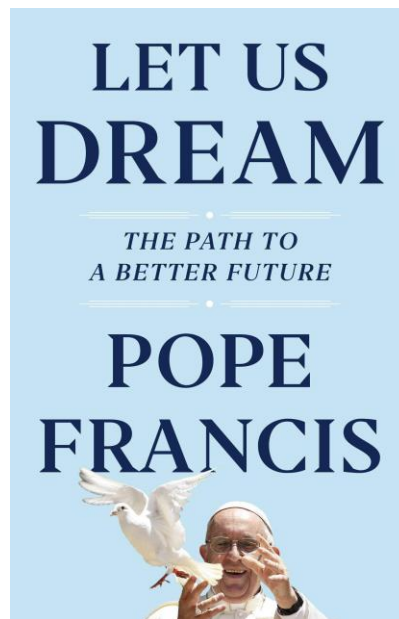


## Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future - by pope Francis



*“God asks us to dare to create something new. We cannot return to the false securities of the political and economic systems we had before the crisis.”*



### Prologue

I see this time as a reckoning. I think of what Jesus tells Peter in Luke 22:31, that the devil wants him to be sifted like wheat. To enter into crisis is to be sifted. Your categories and ways of thinking get shaken up; your priorities and lifestyles are challenged. You cross a threshold, either by your own choice or by necessity, because there are crises, like the one we're going through, that you can't avoid.

The question is whether you're going to come through this crisis and if so, how. The basic rule of a crisis is that you don't come out of it the same. If you get through it, you come out better or worse, but never the same.

We are living a time of trial. The Bible talks of passing through fire to describe such trials, like a kiln testing the potter's handiwork (Sirach 27:5). The fact is that we are all tested in life. It's how we grow.

In the trials of life, you reveal your own heart: how solid it is, how merciful, how big or small. Normal times are like formal social situations: you never have to reveal yourself. You smile, you say the right things, and you come through unscathed, without ever having to show who you really are. But when you're in a crisis, it's the opposite. You have to choose. And in making your choice you reveal your heart.

Think of what happens in history. When people's hearts are tested they become aware of what has held them down. They also feel the presence of the Lord, who is faithful, and responds to the cry of His people. The encounter that follows allows a new future to open up.

Think of what we've seen during this Covid-19 crisis. All those martyrs: men and women who have laid down their lives in service to those most in need. Think of the health workers, the doctors and nurses and other caregivers, as well as the chaplains and all who chose to accompany others in their pain. Taking the necessary precautions, they sought to offer others support and consolation. They were witnesses to closeness and tenderness. Many, tragically, died. To honor their witness, and the suffering of so many, we have to build tomorrow by following the paths they have lit for us.

But—and I say this with pain and shame—let's also think of the usurers, the payday lenders who have appeared at the doors of desperate people. If they stretch out their hands, it is to offer loans that can never be repaid, and which end up permanently indebting those who accept them. Such lenders speculate with the suffering of others.

In moments of crisis you get both good and bad: people reveal themselves as they are. Some spend themselves in the service of those in need, and some get rich off other people's need. Some move out to meet others—in new and creative ways, without leaving their houses—while some retreat behind defensive armor. The state of our hearts is exposed.

It's not just particular individuals who are tested, but entire peoples. Think of governments having to choose in the pandemic. What matters more: to take care of people or keep the financial system going? Do we look after people, or sacrifice them for the sake of the stock market? Do we put the machinery of wealth on hold, knowing people will suffer, yet that way we save lives? In some cases governments have tried to protect the economy first, maybe because they didn't understand the magnitude of the illness, or because they lacked the resources. Those governments have mortgaged their people. In making those choices, their priorities are tested and their values exposed.

In a crisis there's always the temptation to retreat. Of course there are times when we must pull back for tactical reasons—as the Bible says: "To your tents, O Israel!" (1 Kings 12:16)—but there are situations when it is neither right nor human to do so. Jesus makes that clear in his famous parable of the Good Samaritan. When the Levite and the priest withdraw from the man left bleeding and beaten by thieves, they're making a "functional" retreat, by which I mean they're trying to preserve their own place—their roles, their status quo—when faced with a crisis that tests them.

In a crisis, our functionalism is shaken loose and we have to revise and modify our roles and habits in order to emerge from the crisis as better people. A crisis always demands that our whole self be present; you can't retreat, pull back into old ways and roles. Think of the Samaritan: he stops, pulls up, acts, enters into the world of the wounded man, throws himself into the situation, into the other's suffering, and so creates a new future.

To act in a Samaritan way in a crisis means letting myself be struck by what I see, knowing that the suffering will change me. We Christians talk about this as *taking up and embracing the Cross*. Embracing the Cross, confident that what will come is new life, gives us the courage to stop lamenting and move out and serve others and so enable change, which will come only from compassion and service.

Some respond to the suffering of a crisis with a shrug. They say, "God made the world that way, that's just how it is." But such a response misinterprets God's creation as static, when it's a dynamic process. **The world is always being made.** Paul in his Letter to the Romans 8:22 says creation is groaning from birth pangs. God wants to bring forth the world with us, as partners, continually. He has invited us to join Him from the very beginning, in peaceful times and in times of crisis—at all times. It's not like we've been handed this thing all wrapped up and sealed: "Here, have the world."

In the Genesis account God commands Adam and Eve to be fruitful. Humankind has a mandate to change, to build, to master creation in the positive sense of creating from it and with it. So what is to come doesn't depend on some unseen mechanism, a future in which humanity is a passive spectator. No: **we're protagonists, we're—if I can**

**stretch the word—co-creators.** When the Lord told us to go forth and multiply, to master the earth, he's saying: Be the creators of your future.

**From this crisis we can come out better or worse. We can slide backward, or we can create something new.** For now, what we need is the chance to change, to make space for the new thing we need. It's like God says to Isaiah: Come, let us talk this over. If you are ready to listen, we will have a great future. But if you refuse to listen, you'll be devoured by the sword (Isaiah 1:18–20).

There are so many swords that threaten to devour us.

The Covid crisis may seem special because it affects most of humankind. But it is only special in how visible it is. **There are a thousand other crises that are just as dire, but are just far enough from some of us that we can act as if they don't exist. Think, for example, of the wars scattered across different parts of the world; of the production and trade in weapons; of the hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing poverty, hunger, and lack of opportunity; of climate change.** These tragedies may seem distant from us, as part of the daily news that, sadly, fails to move us to change our agendas and priorities. But like the Covid crisis, they affect the whole of humanity.

Just look at the figures, what a nation spends on weapons, and your blood runs cold. Then compare those figures with UNICEF's statistics on how many children lack schooling and go to bed hungry, and you realize who pays the price for arms spending. In the first four months of this year, *3.7 million people died of hunger*. And how many have died from war? Arms spending destroys humanity. It is a very serious coronavirus, but because its victims are hidden from us we don't talk about it.

Similarly hidden to some is the destruction of the natural world. We thought it didn't affect us, because it was happening elsewhere. But suddenly we see it, we get it: **a boat crosses the North Pole for the first time, and we realize the distant floods and forest fires are part of the same crisis that involves us all.**

Look at us now: we put on face masks to protect ourselves and others from a virus we can't see. But what about all those other unseen viruses we need to protect ourselves from? How will we deal with the hidden pandemics of this world, the pandemics of hunger and violence and climate change?

If we are to come out of this crisis less selfish than we went in, we have to let ourselves be touched by others' pain. There's a line in Friedrich Hölderlin's *Hyperion* that speaks to me, about how the danger that threatens in a crisis is never total; there's always a way out. "Where the danger is, also grows the saving power."<sup>1</sup> That's the genius in the human story: there's always a way to escape destruction. Where humankind has to act is precisely there, in the threat itself; that's where the door opens. That line of Hölderlin's has been by my side at different points in my life.

This is a moment to dream big, to rethink our priorities—what we value, what we want, what we seek—and to commit to act in our daily life on what we have dreamed of. What I hear at this moment is similar to what Isaiah hears God saying through him: Come, let us talk this over. Let us dare to dream.

**God asks us to dare to create something new. We cannot return to the false securities of the political and economic systems we had before the crisis.** We need economies that give to all access to the fruits of creation, to the basic needs of life: to land, lodging, and labour. We need a politics that can integrate and dialogue with the poor, the excluded, and the vulnerable, that gives people a say in the decisions that impact their lives. We need to slow down, take stock, and design better ways of living together on this earth.

It's a task for all of us, to which each one of us is invited. But it's a time especially for the restless of heart, that healthy restlessness that spurs us into action. Now, more than ever, what is revealed is the fallacy of making individualism the organizing principle of society. What will be our new principle?

We need a movement of people who know we need each other, who have a sense of responsibility to others and to the world. We need to proclaim that being kind, having faith, and working for the common good are great life goals that need courage and vigour; while glib superficiality and the mockery of ethics have done us no good. The modern era, which has developed equality and liberty with such determination, now needs to focus on **fraternity** with the

same drive and tenacity to confront the challenges ahead. Fraternity will enable freedom and equality to take its rightful place in the symphony.

Millions of people have asked themselves and each other where they might find God in this crisis. What comes to my mind is the overflow. I'm thinking of great rivers that gently swell, so gradually that you hardly notice them, but then the moment comes, and they burst their banks and pour forth. In our society, God's mercy breaks out at such "overflow moments": bursting out, breaking the traditional confines that have kept so many people from what they deserve, shaking up our roles and our thinking. The overflow is to be found in the suffering that this crisis has revealed and the creative ways in which so many people have responded.

I see an overflow of mercy spilling out in our midst. Hearts have been tested. The crisis has called forth in some a new courage and compassion. Some have been sifted and have responded with the desire to reimagine our world; others have come to the aid of those in need in concrete ways that can transform our neighbour's suffering.

That fills me with hope that **we might come out of this crisis better**. But we have to see clearly, choose well, and act right.

**Let's talk about how. Let's allow God's words to Isaiah to speak to us: *Come, let us talk this over. Let us dare to dream.***