

Tablet - March 2010



?We need prayers - and more soldiers!? Most of us will never know a situation of social infrastructure collapse that will make us cry out like this on Facebook, our last remaining means of communication with the outside world. A world that has suddenly become terrifyingly exterior to the tragedy that has suddenly closed in and isolated us.

We all know, but understandably prefer to forget, on what a knife-edge life perpetually rests. In a few moments our entire sense of security, the management systems and plans of life, can evaporate and instead of thinking about how we will fit in the dental appointment and the meetings tomorrow we find ourselves looking dizzily into an abyss. It took 120 seconds for this to happen to the people of Chile as the tectonic plates groaned and shifted to produce what is now measured as the world's biggest earthquake and soon after ten metre tsunamis hit the coast.

As soon as I heard the news I tried to contact MariaRosa our national coordinator who lives in Concepcion, the country's second largest city and close to the epicentre. Only today she got out a message on FaceBook that is, the nasty pun seems appropriate, chilling.

?This is total chaos - the people have weapons and when it gets dark they loot the houses. Last night our neighbours defended us... our homes, this is horrible, no electricity, no water, no food.

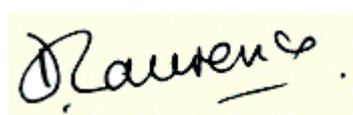
Please pray, during the night we must supervise the streets so that the looters do not enter into our homes. This is worst than the earthquake or the tsunami - it has been terrible. Depending on what happens today and if I manage to get gas, I will go to Santiago with the children.?

The only thing worse, it seems, than a natural disaster of these proportions is the breakdown of the humane norms of society which make it worthy to be called civilisation. How easily we assume that civilisation has been achieved. Yet how easily we can become bored with it or lose it to the fears aroused by an over-riding instinct for survival. What terrifies even more than loss of life or limb is the sudden vision of people whom yesterday we passed comfortably in the street consumed today by a violence and cruelty which is not their own and makes them seem such strangers not only to us but to themselves. The rage for survival seems instead to

rise from a hidden pre-human hunger for life at any cost, a hunger as deep as the abyss itself. The abyss cannot be blamed on anything outside. It is within ourselves. The survival instinct can drown our capacity for self-giving and compassion and subject all social relations and the needs of others to itself.

But our response to disasters is unpredictable. When, a few years ago, the power-supply in Quebec and parts of the Eastern seaboard crashed for several days in mid-winter, the Canadian government sent in troops and called up the reserves. They expected social chaos but none came. In Montreal I heard of the householders forming street communities sharing their provisions and taking special care of the old and sick. The soldiers sat waiting for a breakdown which common humanity averted. It is not, of course, that Canadians are better than Chileans and I am sure we will hear of heroic and selfless actions there that will more than compensate for the looters and vandals in Concepcion. The point is not a national league table of virtue. We know from the twelve years of Nazi barbarism, the Allied bombing of Dresden or a few decades later from the three year siege of Sarajevo and Srebrenica that the abyss can open anywhere, as unpredictably as the natural disasters we dread. This human randomness only makes the knife edge seem sharper.

?Thank you?, MariaRosa wrote before her battery gave out. ?I have been holding up only because I can feel we are united in our prayer. Love to you all.? Prayer to some may seem just a psychological prop, a crutch when crisis has swept away all security. But for others it is a real force. Not magic that can rejig the earth's plates or roll back the tsunami. But a consciousness, pervaded by faith, the ?vision of things unseen?. This awareness often becomes stronger in times of crisis than in the days of our routine securities and mundane complexities and stresses. Prayer means knowledge. In the worst of times we can know that - despite the terror of isolation - we belong to a divine order that the deepest abyss cannot swallow. From this knowledge the word ?love? unexpectedly emerges. It expresses something we can find no better word for and which is now charged with a meaning that changes the meaning of everything.

A handwritten signature in black ink on a yellow background. The signature reads "Laurence" in a cursive script, with a small flourish at the end.

Laurence Freeman OSB

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