

# Love in the time of COVID-19



In his novel, *Love in the Time of Cholera*, Colombian Nobel prize winning author Gabriel García Márquez tells the story of the complicated marriage of Dr. Juvenal Urbino and his wife Fermina.

Urbino is a passionless man, a medical scientist, devoted to order and progress, committed to the eradication of cholera. Before their marriage, Fermina was involved in an ardent affair with the fiery Florentino, who despite her decision to marry Urbino, declares his undying love for her and pledges to remain faithful to her no matter what.

Fermina nonetheless commits herself to her marriage, growing old with Urbino, while Florentino remains a regular presence in their lives. Throughout the novel, Fermina is caught between the two men, one clinical and methodical, the other impassioned and promiscuous. One of the main themes in García Márquez's novel is the idea that lovesickness is just that, a *sickness*. And Florentino suffers from it as he would a disease like cholera. At times, his love for Fermina literally makes him ill.

Urbino's obsession with the eradication of cholera takes on the symbolic meaning of him wanting to rid Fermina's life of passion. In both Spanish (the original language of the novel) and English, the term *choleric* describes a fiery, passionate person, so it's clear that Urbino believes Fermina would be happier and more settled without the effects of such strong feelings.

If you haven't read *Love in the Time of Cholera*, it might not surprise you that Gabriel García Márquez concludes the book with a beautiful affirmation of the power and beauty of lifelong passion and ardor. He's a *Colombian* novelist, after all.

*Today, we live not in the time of cholera, but the less poetic-sounding pandemic, COVID-19.*

Appearing as if out of nowhere in Wuhan province in China, scientists had never seen it before, and it's spread has reminded us all of the strength and pervasiveness of viral expansion. We need to take all the precautions recommended by medical authorities.

But I'm with Gabriel García Márquez on this one. The spread of the latest coronavirus serves to remind me of another 'virus', a rapidly spreading force that's impossible to 'cure' — love.

The earliest Christians were so infected by it that when a nearby town or village contracted the plague, some of them moved to that community to minister to the sick, even to the point of their own deaths.

In his book, *The Rise of Christianity*, Rodney Stark quotes the early bishop Dionysius saying:

**“Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead...”**

The selfless response of the black church to Philadelphia's 1793 yellow fever outbreak has been well documented. And more recently, we can look to the lives of heroic saints who have served the sick and dying, from St Teresa of Calcutta to St Damien of Molokai.

Today, one Christian organization, GlobalGrace has mobilized nearly 100 volunteers in Wuhan province, distributing facemasks, disinfectant, food and supplies to more than 210,000 people.

In Vietnam, Fr Joseph Huu is working in a province completely quarantined off due to worries over the coronavirus. He is coordinating health services and pastoral care in the area, taking supplies and advice to villages throughout the area.

In saying this, I'm not suggesting anyone ignore the sensible warnings by medical authorities to wash our hands, practice "social distancing", and self-quarantine if showing symptoms. Italian churches are making wise decisions to cancel services, and international Christian conventions around the world are postponing or cancelling their events.

*But it is also worth noting that in a world where people are fighting over toilet paper, those of us infected with the love of Christ are called to practice the kind of serene and confident trust that death's sting has been blunted forever by his resurrection.*

This doesn't mean we blithely ignore the severity of the pandemic, nor that we overlook the suffering caused by it. We serve, we give, we pray, we attend to those who are frightened and uncertain. But we don't panic. We are not driven by fear.

Writing at the height of the Cold War and all its pervasive fears about nuclear holocaust, C.S.Lewis captured this sense of serenity when he wrote: "If we are all going to be destroyed by an atomic bomb, let that bomb when it comes find us doing sensible and human things — praying, working, teaching, reading, listening to music, bathing the children, playing tennis, chatting to our friends over a pint and a game of darts—not huddled together like frightened sheep and thinking about bombs. They may break our bodies (any microbe can do that) but they need not dominate our minds."

A cure for COVID-19 might be found in some lab similar to Dr. Juvenal Urbino's in *Love in the Time of Cholera*, but there ain't no cure for those infected with the love of Christ.

*There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. (1Jn 4:18)*

by Michael Frost