Opinion



A person is taken on a stretcher into the United Memorial Medical Center after going through testing for COVID-19 Thursday, March 19, 2020, in Houston. People were lined up in their cars in a line that stretched over two miles to be tested in the drive-thru testing for coronavirus. (AP/David J. Phillip)



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Too many politicians, businesses and reporters are looking on the COVID-19 pandemic as a sprint rather than a marathon. They keep asking, "when can we get back to normal?" Many believe that "normal" is just around the corner, this summer or at least next fall. The truth is that we will not get back to normal until the American population is protected from the virus by a vaccine. That could take two or more years.

We are not ready — spiritually, economically or politically — for a marathon. We have not been training. We are flabby and out of shape. We are not ready to make the sacrifices that Americans made to win world wars or get through the Great Depression.

Politically, we have spent the past decades totally focused on partisan conflicts and elections rather than on what is best for the common good. We are so ideologically driven that we are unable to be pragmatic in problem solving. Compromise has become a dirty word; our opponents are demonized; and partisan gridlock is the result. We are only focused on today and ignore tomorrow.

Economically, we have been on a spending and tax-cutting binge. Interest rates have been low, so consumers, businesses and governments have borrowed without any concern for the future. We have ignored traditional economic theory that says we should save during good times so that we can borrow and run deficits during bad times. We have built an economy dependent on consumer spending while ignoring

public needs like education, public health and infrastructure.

Spiritually, we have been self-centered. Spirituality has too often meant feeling good about ourselves rather than service of others. Sacrifice and the cross have been banished from the spiritual vocabulary so that faith has often reinforced American individualism rather than challenged it. It has also reinforced our prejudices by telling us that we are the chosen and everyone else is evil.

It is not surprising that we are not ready for the political, economic and spiritual marathon needed to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. This should not surprise us. For the same reasons, we were unable to respond to global warming.

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As a social scientist I confess I am very pessimistic that we can change in time to save ourselves. As a Christian, I must believe in the power of the Spirit to lead us to conversion, for conversion is what we need. This conversion must not only deal with how we get through the summer or how we will survive two years with COVID-19, but how we avoid other challenges to come, foremost of which is the coming apocalypse of global warming.

We need a political system that respects scientific expertise rather than political pundits, encourages listening rather than shouting, rewards realism rather than rhetoric, and prizes problem solvers rather than talkers.

We need a system that responds not to the rich and special interests, but to workers and families. We need regulations that protect the public and provide a level playing field so that bad companies do not have an advantage over good ones.

We need an economic system that does not prioritize consumer spending. We need a tax system that takes more from the rich and the middle class to pay for public goods. We need a gradually increasing carbon tax so that we can be weaned from our addiction to plastic, coal, oil and gas.

But none of this will be possible without a spiritual conversion that ennobles service and sacrifice. As long as our priority is having enough toilet paper and a place to party, we will not survive as a nation or as a species.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a wakeup call for political, economic and spiritual conversion. Returning to "normal" is not an option.

[Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese is a columnist for Religion News Service and author of *Inside the Vatican: The Politics and Organization of the Catholic Church*.]

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