

## Coronavirus Covid-19. Card. Scherer (Brazil): "Controversies occur all the time, for us, caring for people is what counts"

"Bolsonaro? I would rather not talk about him. The Church today has a primary concern, that is to care for the health and life of the people. The Church is present, she is close to the people, she goes forth to meet people where they are, even availing herself of new tools" said Card. **Odilo Scherer**, Archbishop of São Paulo of Brazil, Vice President of the Latin American Episcopal Council, in an interview granted to SIR via Skype. The conversation centred on two delicate "fronts".



First, the difficult situation of São Paulo, the Brazilian city with the highest number of contagions and victims of the coronavirus (according to figures released Friday 27 March more than 1000 cases with 58 deaths). The Cardinal highlights an additional "grave concern" for the poorest who live on the streets and in the favelas. This situation is coupled by the decision, shared with the other bishops of Brazil, to celebrate Mass without the faithful, following the recommendations of the Health Ministry. Yet President Jair Bolsonaro's stance was "disruptive". In fact, after having overcome the fear of having contracted the virus, as instead was the case with two of his collaborators, the Brazilian president appeared on television criticizing the bishops' decision and stating that Covid-19 is "just slightly worse than a cold." Furthermore, the Legislative Decree N°10,292, issued Thursday by the President of the Republic, stipulates that "public services and fundamental activities" should include "all forms of religious activity". This was enough to create confusion, not least because powerful Pentecostal groups are "pressing" Bolsonaro. Dom Joel Portella, Secretary General of the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil (CNBBB), reiterated in a note that religious activity is included in the list of essential services, but "on condition that the decisions of the Health Ministry are respected." Therefore, "there is no room for interpreting the legal provisions in such a way as to force the reopening of churches, much less in case of gatherings of any kind". This position is shared by Card. Scherer. **Your Eminence, could you describe the situation in São Paulo at the moment? How is the archdiocese helping out?** Many people are hospitalized and others have already died, there is widespread concern. National authorities have imposed rigorous measures, everyone is shut indoors and the city, usually full of people, is empty. For the past week or so, as archdiocese, we suspended the public celebration of Mass as well as meetings and gatherings. We go on with the feeling that the health crisis is only just beginning. **Yet the many homeless and those living in the shacks of large favelas, such as Cracolândia, can hardly be forced to "stay at home." What can be done for them?** This is a serious concern, because in our city many people live on the street, and there are large numbers of poor, young people, without a home.



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As a Church we are trying to implement all possible initiatives. The situation is undoubtedly difficult, there are no real homes in the favelas, with many high-risk situations. I must say, however, even in those districts people are worried, it's all suspended and everything is shut down. However, it must be said that enforcing strict rules in those areas is not easy. **President Bolsonaro criticized the bishops. In his latest decree he described religious activity as "essential."** Nevertheless, the CNBB confirmed its decision and its president, Dom Walmor Oliveira de Azevedo, denounced the head of state as "irresponsible". What is your position? I prefer not to comment on the President's statements. *We all agree that religion is fundamental, but its activity does not require "personal attendance."* For example, religious celebrations over the past few weeks have been covered by a large number of media outlets and social networks. I have just finished celebrating livestreamed Mass on Facebook. We are present, the Church is present, we are reaching out to the people wherever they are, faith is important and people need it. *At this moment we are also called to acknowledge the existence of new, different means allowing us to be close to our people.* Controversies occur all the time, but we are in peace, among us bishops we all agree on the line taken. Today we need to care for the people, for the sick, to be close to everyone. **This is the position of Catholic bishops. But as we know, Pentecostal movements represent a vast, often informal and uncoordinated universe in Brazil. Do Bolsonaro's words have any impact on this world? What indications do you have?** Unquestionably there are different positions, and in some cases they are advocated by powerful, cohesive realities, with ample media coverage. I think there will be a price to pay for all this. For our part, I can confirm that

**our primary concern is people's health. Everything else takes second place.**

The economy, the very maintenance of our church structures. Right now we are not thinking about it. Life and health are what count the most right now. **coronaviruWhat's the situation of health services in large urban centres? Are there also Church-related facilities involved in relief efforts?** Of course, there are Church-related health facilities, but right now Covid-19 patients are being treated in public facilities, which are responding adequately. There might be a need to step up efforts to provide more beds and respirators. This is our concern, but at the moment hospitals are not in a state of emergency. **What is your message in view of the Holy Week and Easter?** This Holy Week will certainly be different from all those I experienced and celebrated to date. Our role model is Pope Francis, the prayers and gestures he is making, as in an empty St. Peter's Square. I gave directions to the parish priests for the celebration of the various rites. The churches will be empty, but there will be liturgy, Easter will be celebrated, albeit with restrictions. This is a new time of evangelization, the Church is true to herself even if she is not gathered in the assembly, she is the body of the Lord even if she is dispersed. Staying at home allows us to rediscover the household, the family, just like a small church. Now is the time for all of us to learn new things. May I add that our solidarity and our prayers are with Italy at this time. I pray that the Lord will stop this ordeal that has befallen us.

