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## America in the mirror one year into pandemic

(from New York) Yesterday, the United States marked a painful and grim anniversary, with 529,079 deaths, 29,150,069 people infected and some 10 million lost jobs. *However, 11 March 2021 ushered in the opportunity for a renaissance with the numbers of recovered people, over 100 million vaccines distributed and over 90 million people who received them.* It also celebrated a sweeping \$1.9 trillion economic stimulus package for businesses and cities approved by Congress, albeit not with bipartisan approval - divisions persist even in the face of national tragedy. It celebrated with the reopening of schools in California and the opening of new factories that changed production to meet medical emergencies. Last night at 8pm local time in Washington DC, US President Joe Biden addressed the country marking a year with unprecedented impact on American society. *The US President recalled the sacrifices made by the American people and the great losses suffered by communities and families, along with the role played by each and every American in defeating the virus and returning to normalcy.* On March 11, 2020, the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic and the US started registering hospitalisations and deaths. Powerless in the face of an unknown virus, while offices, churches, temples, theatres, banks and universities were being shut down at great cost, and emptied subways became new shelters for the homeless. *On March 27, 2020, the US Church mourned the first death of one of its priests. Father Jorge Ortiz-Garay, 49, parish priest of St Bridget's Church in the diocese of Brooklyn, died in the solitude of a hospital ward.* Meanwhile, hundreds of dead bodies were put in repurposed freezer trucks outside hospitals as the morgues reached full capacity. **Gabri Brambrick**, a New York physician, has vivid memories of the outbreak of the pandemic in a New Jersey hospital. "We saw a mounting number of cases being recorded in Spain, in Italy, and we knew this tsunami was heading our way, but we didn't know how and to what extent it would affect us." Then came the phone call from one of his daughters on her way back from college - shut down after several cases of infection. She was running a fever. It was COVID-19. "My daughter was among the chaotic inflow of patients, and I personally experienced the devastation of that moment. We had very scarce information, there was great uncertainty and I realised that in this tragedy my own life was on the line. *Every time I walked into the hospital I knew I could die.* The hospitals in New York and New Jersey during the first 10 weeks of COVID-19 were like a battlefield." For **Jeffrey and Ivana** the onset of the pandemic, mandatory quarantine and working from home led to rediscovering family life. She is a schoolteacher, he runs a security company, they have two children and were always in a hurry to keep up with their after-school activities: swimming, football, singing. *"The pandemic disconnected us from the outside world, but it reconnected us as a family. Together we learned how to cook, do housework, paint,"* said Ivana, almost longing for those weeks. Jeffrey stopped going to work and started dedicating himself to household crafts and home repairs requiring maintenance. In December, Ivana was fired and became infected. "I was overcome with fear. The fear of not being able to cope. The highlight of the day was waking up and seeing that I didn't have difficulties breathing, that I didn't have high fever, and that my cough had subsided. We defeated the disease together." *Ivana said that prayer and faith had been her anchorage as all plans began to crumble, one after the other.* She returned to work after several months and the computer screen was the only way to attend to her students, some of whom were home alone because their parents could not afford to stop working; while others were alone because their parents' marriages broke up during the lockdown period. "One of the valuable lessons learned throughout this past year is the strength of the human family, working together as a scientific community. We came together, with colleagues from all over the world, to understand more about this virus, to share data on our patients. This enabled us to gain greater knowledge. *We came together for the good of humanity.* Dr **Bambrick's** description of 2020 captures the altruism of her colleagues, the endless working hours, as well as the difficulties caused by distorted communication about the virus on social media and in politics, creating numerous difficulties in hospital wards. "Social media must be properly regulated. We were confronted with non-verified information, nonsensical theories, opinions that have affected

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our ability to control the virus. Social media can be a place to let out steam, express ideas, but scientific data and facts are not an opinion. This unreliable and unverified information has done great harm.”

Maddalena Maltese, from New York