

The Aroma of the Old Kitchen

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The small city of 76,423 residents keeps breathing. The gray and empty roads are now full of singing birds. The balconies have visitors: people staring at the street and children playing with the sky.

Every now and then a few cars, a few bicycles. I see them and wonder: Are they going to work? Maybe they are, maybe they're not.

Later on, the truck. It stops in front of the supermarket. I have no doubt they are working, thankfully for us.

Then the queue. People wait in the street. The label on the door clearly states: No More Than 10 People Inside. Some are aware and responsible. Some are not.

To buy food in the supermarket has become the biggest mental effort of the quarantine. There is food, plenty of food, but as time goes by, it begins to feel like you are entering a *boxing ring* instead of a store.

In this ring the boxers do not wear gloves, even if they should, and the adversary changes from round to round. In the opening round, you face a tough, two-fisted opponent: *anxiety* and *fear*. When *anxiety* and *fear* gain the upper hand, you charge through the entrance, move nervously through the aisles, panic picking, hardly paying attention, immediately forgetting the strange new mandates: Do not touch anything you don't intend to buy. Keep a distance between you and everyone else. Do not look anyone in the face when you talk to them. Your only choice if you can't keep the first-round opponent at bay: Move as fast as possible. Get out as quickly as you can. Return with haste to a safe place. As Manuela, a neighbor, shared with me:

When I go to the supermarket, I am so *nervous* that I take anything without noticing if it is expensive or not. I want to avoid being away from home for too long.

It is clear that those who falter in their confrontation with *anxiety* and *fear* do not want to hurt anyone; they are driven by panic.

Now onto Round Two and the next opponent: *selfishness*. Those who fail to resist this adversary take what seems like forever to choose what seems like half of what the butcher's shop has to offer. The rest of the boxers train in patience, waiting for their turn. After the first fifteen minutes, they obediently shuffle to ringside, where they sit and smile. Some things cannot be changed, only accepted.

Perhaps that is the uniqueness of this battle. The more you enter into it, the more it trains you to stop fighting. To win you must be able to remain calm in the middle of the ring. If you can do so, you will make it to the final round, a round that goes beyond the supermarket. The round of *compassion*, *generosity*, *gratefulness*, and *unity*. The "family next door" experience is best summarized in Claudia's words:

At home, my young daughter has stopped complaining about the food. She was overly shocked by the empty shelves at the supermarket. Now she is thankful for having food. On the other hand, my husband is unemployed, and I am teleworking. He has become more responsible for the household chores and the children than I, and I am utterly happy. I feel that we have become an incredible team. I think this misfortune has brought unity at home!

A lot of experts say that life will not be the same after COVID-19. The health and educational systems will need time to recover, and tourism will not return to anything close to previous levels for a long time. What will happen financially not even the best expert can predict. However, today life is indeed out of the ordinary. Families at home, working and cooperating, grandchildren missing their grandparents, neighbors helping neighbors, pots up and down in the kitchen, people spending time each day cooking and feeding their loved ones. As Eusebi, an 80-year-old neighbor, said,

The aroma of cooking is invading the entrance of the building. As I walk up the stairs, I can guess who is cooking lentils. I have only a few neighbors, but I can smell forgotten scents from a time when the kitchen was part of everyday life.

Because in these times of coronavirus, the aroma of the old kitchen is back. 