THE WAY OF THE CROSS IN TIME OF PANDEMIC

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Concluding prayer from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

Introduction

From very early times Christian pilgrims visiting Jerusalem would retrace the route Jesus took to his crucifixion. Known as the Via Dolorosa (Sorrowful Way) pilgrims would pause at certain points commemorating various events in Jesus’ journey. Later the Church encouraged the faithful to make the way of the cross in their own churches around the world. This enabled people to meditate on Jesus’ passion and death without having to travel to Jerusalem. The traditional 14 Stations of the Cross can be found today in every Catholic Church.

In this time of global pandemic, we are invited to see our situation in the light of Christ’s own suffering, death and resurrection. Each of us in our own way is sharing in the mystery of the cross. The Way of the Cross presented here is offered as a means of reflecting on the Via Dolorosa we are making together during this current crisis.

The Way of the Cross in Time of Pandemic is meant to be a contemplative prayer. Take plenty of time to meditate in silence over the each of the Scripture passages that accompany the stations. One of the fruits of our current isolation from one another is the opportunity to rediscover the benefits of slowing down, taking our time, and being silent in God’s presence.

Introductory Scripture: Psalm 88

Lord God of my salvation,
before you I cry day and night. [...]  
I am full of misfortunes,
my life is close to the grave.
I am counted among those who go down into the pit. [...]  
You have cast me into the deep pit,
in darkness and in the shadow of death.
Your anger weighs on me
and with all your waves you submerge me. [...]  
I am a prisoner without escape,
my eyes are consumed in sorrow. [...]  
Your anger has gone over me.
The First Station: Jesus is Condemned to Death

We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.
Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. "I am innocent of this man's blood," he said. "It is your responsibility!" Matthew 27:24

We’re all washing our hands a lot more often these days. We do so to eliminate bacteria that can spread disease. Pilate washed his hands, trying to escape responsibility for Jesus’ death. Despite his claim, “I am innocent!” Pilate is forever remembered as having condemned Jesus to death. We can no more cleanse ourselves of sin than Pilate could. The good news is that Jesus does that for us. The water and blood that flowed from his side as he hung upon the cross washes away the sin of the world. We are made clean.

Wash me clean from my guilt. Purify me from my sin. Psalm 51:2
The Second Station: Jesus Accepts His Cross

We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.
Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Then Pilate handed Jesus over to be crucified, and the soldiers took Him away. Carrying his own cross, he went out to the Place of the Skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha. John 19:17

Doing penance is part of the Christian way of life. Sometimes we choose our penance, as in the fasting and works charity we take on during Lent. At other times, we are asked to bear a cross not of our own choosing, such all illness or infirmity. Jesus accepted his cross out of love for you and me. Like him, you and I can embrace the crosses that come our way during this time out of love for one another. Social distancing, the closure of schools and businesses, the suspension of public Masses, these are all opportunities to take up our daily cross and follow Jesus.

Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Matthew 16:24
The Third Station: Jesus Falls for the First Time

We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.
Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God’s paths to follow our own. Yet the LORD laid on him the sins of us all. Isaiah 53:6

As Jesus carried his cross, he was weighed down not only by the weight of the wood, but by the burden of our sins. According to tradition, Jesus fell several times on his way to Calvary. Right now, we are weighed down by many worries and concerns: our own and others’ health; our inability to worship together; our job and finances. Because the cross is heavy, we might stumble and fall into discouragement and be tempted to lose hope. Looking to Jesus, we find in him the strength we need to carry on, one day at a time.

Jesus said, “Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” Matthew 11:28
The Fourth Station: Jesus Meets His Sorrowful Mother

We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.
Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, “Woman, behold, your son!” Then he said to the disciple, “Behold, your mother!” And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home. John 19:26-27

Even as he way dying on the cross, Jesus was creating a new family by entrusting his Mother to his beloved disciple – and thereby to all of us. As Christians we are bound to one another through faith. Our common baptism makes us one family in Christ. During this time, we can remain united with one another in prayer. We can reach out to those who are isolated by phone or online communication. We need to remember we are all in this together.

For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, in all, and living through all. Ephesians 4: 4-6
The Fifth Station: Simon Helps Jesus Carry His Cross

We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.  
Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

As they led Jesus away, a man named Simon, who was from Cyrene, happened to be coming in from the countryside. The soldiers seized him and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. Luke 23:26

We all like to be self-reliant and not have to depend on others. Yet God’s own Son was humble enough to let Simon help him bear the cross. In this time of crisis, can we be humble enough to reach out for help when we need assistance? You and I don’t have to make this journey alone. There are always friends and family members, neighbors and community volunteers who are ready to accompany you and help you bear the load.

Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. Psalm 25:16
The Sixth Station: Veronica Wipes the Face of Jesus

We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.  
**Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.**

> He was despised and rejected— a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief. We turned our backs on him and looked the other way. He was despised, and we did not care. There was nothing beautiful or majestic about his appearance, nothing to attract us to him.  
> Isaiah 53: 2-3

Veronica took a great risk when she pushed past the crowd and the soldiers to wipe Jesus’ bloody and tear-streaked face. She acted with compassion and offered what little help and comfort she could give to Jesus. Right now, healthcare workers and those providing other essential services are placing themselves at risk out of compassion for others. We owe them our gratitude as we keep them in our prayers each day. They remind us of the importance of doing our part, even it’s simply remaining at home to prevent the spread of disease. We are each called to make sacrifices for the welfare of others.

> “I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!”  
> Matthew 25:40
The Seventh Station: Jesus Falls a Second Time

We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.
Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.

Isaiah 53:5

Weary and exhausted, Jesus falls a second time on his way to Calvary. The road we are on right now may be long and at times we will grow weary. Parents might feel exhausted as they work from home while at the same time caring for children who cannot attend school. We might stumble and fall, becoming impatient or irritable with one another. It helps to know that Jesus understands our weakness. He can give us strength to get back up and continue on.

The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and he helps me.
Psalm 28:7
The Eighth Station: Jesus Meets the Women of Jerusalem

We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you. 
Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

And there followed him a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for him. But turning to them Jesus said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.”

Jesus knew hard times were coming for Jerusalem, which is why he tells the women to weep for themselves and their children. Even in the midst of his own terrible suffering he is thinking of the suffering of others. We all face hardships in this time of crisis. Despite our own difficulties, we need to think of others’ needs as well, even if all we can do is pray for them. Remember, we are all in this together.

So that there should be no division in the body, but that its members should have mutual concern for one another. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it ....
1 Corinthians 12: 25-26
The Ninth Station: Jesus Falls the Third Time

We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.
Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

*Insults have broken my heart, and I am in despair. I looked for sympathy, but there was none, for comforters, but I found no one.* Psalm 69:20

As Jesus fell and struggled to stagger on, there was no one to comfort him. The crowds who had earlier welcomed him as their Messiah are gone. There are only the soldiers who mock him and drive him forward with their whips and spears. Right now, those in hospitals or long-term care facilities are deprived of outside visitors. In many places residents are confined to their rooms where they take their meals in solitude. Imagine how alone they must feel in the midst of their suffering. Let us pause and pray that they experience God’s closeness to them at this time.

*I am laid low in the dust; preserve my life according to your word.* Psalm 119:25
The Tenth Station: Jesus Is Stripped of His Garments

We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.
Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.
2 Corinthians 8:9

During his life on earth Jesus had few, if any, possessions. Now he is stripped of everything, even the clothes on his back. We have been stripped of so much during this crisis: our daily routines, forms of entertainment, our ability to gather with one another, and even our livelihood. So many around the world have been stripped of their health, and families deprived of loved ones through death. In this moment we are invited to contemplate what is most essential – our relationship with the Lord.

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. Mark 13:31
The Eleventh Station: Jesus Is Nailed to the Cross

We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.
Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Luke 23:33-34

It is said that death is the great equalizer, the fate we all share in common no matter what our position or social status. Similarly, a pandemic does not discriminate. It touches the lives of the small and the great alike. As does sin, the sickness of soul which infects us all. Jesus, though free from sin, gave himself up to a sinner’s death on the cross. He willingly shares our common fate in order to heal our wounded souls. His death becomes the remedy to sin and death.

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. 2 Corinthians 5:21
The Twelfth Station: Jesus Dies on the Cross

We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.
Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Jesus said, “It is finished.” And bowing his head, head he handed over the spirit.
John 19:30

As he dies, Jesus breathes forth the Holy Spirit, the promise of the Father, the gift of new life. We behold his lifeless body on the cross and yet we see by faith the possibility of a new beginning for humanity. This gives us hope even in the face of our current crisis. God has the power to bring life out of death. Relying on the Holy Spirit, you and I can emerge from this time of intense suffering as a new creation, as a people purified like gold in the furnace. Ave crux, spes unica! Hail to the Cross, our only hope!

And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved .... Romans 8:23
The Thirteenth Station: Jesus Is Taken Down from the Cross

We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.
Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow .... Lamentations 1:12

Tradition holds that when Jesus was taken down from the cross his lifeless body was placed in the arms of his grieving Mother. In her sorrow is reflected the grief of all who mourn the loss of loved one in death. How many times is the image of the Pieta being replicated during this pandemic? How many families are prevented from gathering together to mourn? Let us pray for those who have died: Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord. And let perpetual light shine upon them.

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord! O Lord hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy! Psalm 130:1-2
The Fourteenth Station: Jesus Is Laid in the Tomb

We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.
Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Joseph [of Arimathea] took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock. And he rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb and went away. Matthew 27:59-60

An ancient homily for Holy Saturday states: “Today there is a great silence over the earth, a great silence, and stillness, a great silence because the King sleeps; the earth was in terror and was still ….” Many have a hard time with silence, as our modern lives are filled with noise and distractions, our minds bombarded with a constant stream of images and information. Yet without silence, we cannot hear the voice of God. This time of imposed isolation can be the opportunity to enter the “great silence” of Holy Saturday, to sit outside the tomb of Jesus and wait patiently for the sound of Alleluia.

Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth! Psalm 46:10
COVID-19: A Prayer of Solidarity

For all who have contracted coronavirus,
We pray for care and healing.

For those who are particularly vulnerable,
We pray for safety and protection.

For all who experience fear or anxiety,
We pray for peace of mind and spirit.

For affected families who are facing difficult decisions between food on the table or public safety,
We pray for policies that recognize their plight.

For those who do not have adequate health insurance,
We pray that no family will face financial burdens alone.

For those who are afraid to access care due to immigration status,
We pray for recognition of the God-given dignity of all.

For our brothers and sisters around the world,
We pray for shared solidarity.

For public officials and decisionmakers,
We pray for wisdom and guidance.

Father, during this time may your Church be a sign of hope, comfort and love to all.
Grant peace.
Grant comfort.
Grant healing.
Be with us, Lord.

Amen.