

**PulledQuote: It is an understatement to say that this is “new territory” for all of us, but God is never outdone in the outpouring of his grace and blessings. After the darkness comes dawn, and after this intense experience of Lent, there will still be Easter.**

**Headline: From coronavirus to Resurrection**

Never in living memory have we celebrated Holy Week and Easter as we have this year. The outbreak of coronavirus around the world and in our own country has upended the daily lives of millions, and brought sickness, fear, and even death to a growing number of our brothers and sisters. For several weeks now, we have been taking extraordinary measures to stem the tide of this pandemic, even to the point of canceling public Masses and most public activities of the Church. With great regret and sadness, I suspended the public spiritual celebrations that are so important to all of us, especially in this most holy time of the year. This was deemed necessary to keep us from inadvertently spreading or contracting the virus among ourselves and in the wider community.

But even though our observance of Holy Week and Easter may be muted, even though the outward solemnity of the liturgies and devotions is missed by us all, we are still called to participate in the saving mysteries of Christ’s redemption. In fact, I have no doubt that God will be at work among us, inviting us to a quiet but prayerful awareness of the death and resurrection of his Son. Our experience of these last weeks of Lent has perhaps been more intense because of the prayers and sacrifices of the recent crisis. And in the midst of this crisis, I believe God has summoned us to a greater faith in his providence, greater charity towards our neighbor, and greater hope in his mercy.

One of the precautions we are urged to take is social distancing, hence our canceled public Masses. But it is important to remember that social distancing doesn’t have to distance us from God or from each other. We have in this unusual period a perfect opportunity to show our love and concern for our immediate family, for neighbors, and for those in need through calls, emails, and even material assistance. There are some who may feel alone and afraid, or just confused, so a simple effort to touch base could be a great comfort. I also want to applaud the many pastors and faithful who continue to reach out to those in need. The Catholic Church has a long record of service to others during past plagues and pandemics, and we will continue now to attend to our brothers and sisters in need, whether spiritually or materially.

Our prayer life as we finish Lent can also be strengthened by this experience. Charity suggests that we need to keep our distance from each other for a while, but God is as near to us as ever. We may not have the immediate access to Mass that we are used to, but nothing can separate us from the love of God if we stay close to our Savior. Mass is still being celebrated, and although we cannot be present physically, we can still unite ourselves to the Lord’s sacrifice with our hearts. There are many opportunities to participate in the Mass through livestream on the internet, including on our own Diocese of Fargo webpage, and through broadcast Masses on television. Some families have even set up a sacred space in their homes where they can reverently participate as they watch the Mass together. Visits to pray before the Blessed Sacrament, celebrating the sacrament of Reconciliation when possible, praying the Rosary or Divine Mercy Chaplet at home, and a daily spiritual communion can sustain us through this difficult time. Nothing can substitute for being personally present for the Sacrifice of the Mass, but the Church has an abundance of spiritual riches that she still makes available to us.

As we deal with our inability to attend Mass, it might be worthwhile to remember our many brothers and sisters around the world who hardly ever get to attend Mass because of persecution, danger, geographical distance, or a shortage of priests. There are a greater number than we realize who rarely see a priest for Mass, and we now have the opportunity to join ourselves in solidarity with them. Many of our homebound neighbors are also prevented from attending Mass because of physical infirmity. Now we can understand their plight a little better as well. As members of the Body of Christ, we have a spiritual bond in Jesus that transcends the limitations of physical distance.

It’s also important to remember that Easter always follows Good Friday. Although the celebration of our Lord’s Passion will be different this year, we know in faith that Christ is Risen, and that he is

always with his Church. The reality of the Resurrection will be even more glorious when we come through the present health crisis and gather once again for the Church's sacred liturgies. After all, every Sunday is a day permeated with the Lord's Resurrection, especially during the Easter Season. The slowing down and closure of so many activities gives us an opportunity to really live Sunday as a celebration of the Resurrection. Hopefully this experience will also give rise to a greater sense of longing for the sacraments and for the risen life that our Lord prepares for us. It is an understatement to say that this is "new territory" for all of us, but God is never outdone in the outpouring of his grace and blessings. After the darkness comes dawn, and after this intense experience of Lent, there will still be Easter.

Let us pray for one another, and let us pray especially for those who suffer illness and those who care for them. Together let us ask Christ our Redeemer, the Divine Physician, to grant us his healing grace. And may the Blessed Virgin Mary, Health of the Sick and Help of Christians, be with us and intercede for us in our time of need. I assure you all of my constant prayers for your good health and safety. And, above all, I pray for the grace of this holy time of year, the grace of redemption and joy, as we celebrate the death and the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. To all of you, I wish a most blessed Holy Week and a Happy Easter!