

1 May 2020  
 Memorial of Saint Joseph the Worker  
*Rome under quarantine*

Dear family and friends,

Pax Christi

I received many graces on last Saturday's pilgrimage to Frascara (the university building, *not* Frascati, the Italian hill town outside Rome—*Magari*, as the Italians say, “if only!”). My novice classmate and I began our pilgrimage with Mass concelebrated in the small chapel across from my bedroom in the Palazzo Centrale. We had pranzo in the community refectory—tortellini in *brodo* (broth), Italian sausages with grilled onions, and Sicilian oranges. We then made our way to the Palazzo Centrale's massive bronze doors. To open them at any time is always a somewhat solemn act, but most especially last Saturday. As I opened them, I was almost giddy with anticipation. We stood there for a moment just looking out the front door. Then, for the first time in seven weeks, we gingerly exited the building. How odd it felt to step out into the Piazza della Pilotta! Something that I have done innumerable times over the past three decades, and yet on Saturday the experience seemed almost novel. How quiet that sun-bathed piazza was! The only soul in sight was Serge seated in his portico directly across the piazza from the Palazzo Centrale. By mid-May the Roman sun will generate heat so scorching that no pedestrian will want to walk in it—although this year perhaps pedestrians will flock to it in droves—socially distanced droves, of course. But for now, it is still a pleasure to be warmed by the Roman sun's rays.

As soon as I exited the building, I made my way straight to Serge. As I approached he was digging into a kiwi at the end of his own pranzo.

“Serge,” I cried out from a contagion-free distance, “*Buongiorno!*”. He looked up and smiled broadly. Thanks be to God, COVID-19 has not taken away Serge's joy.

“*Salve!*” he said.

Mindful of Saint James' admonition that it profits one nothing to wish the hungry well without providing them food, I came bearing a gift—some tins of tuna from my pre-quarantine stash that I have hardly touched. I offered them to Serge, and he was glad to get them. So I placed them strategically at the base of a nearby column. Having seen Serge reading so studiously for the past seven weeks (I hope that my students have been reading so diligently!), I could not resist the temptation to inquire about his reading.

“What have you been reading these days?” I asked.

“Bulgakov,” he responded.

I was astonished. Serge was reading the twentieth-century Russian Orthodox theologian Sergei Nicolaevich Bulgakov! I could hardly believe it. But since the university's Trinitarian theology professor lives in the Frascara building, I thought that my Jesuit confrere might have introduced Serge to Bulgakov. So, I inquired further, “Are you reading his Trinitarian theology?”

“No,” Serge replied, “I’m reading the novel *Il Maestro e Margherita* (*The Master and Margarita*).”

That took me by surprise. I had no idea that Bulgakov had also written novels. As it turns out, he hadn’t. Serge explained that he was reading *Mikhail* Bulgakov’s twentieth-century satire about the devil’s visit to the officially atheistic Soviet Union—one of the best novels of the twentieth century, I later discovered. Clearly, Serge knows more about contemporary Russian literature than I do, which impressed me even more. To be honest, I haven’t always been convinced by *Sergei* Bulgakov’s theology, anyway. Not to flabbergast me any further, Serge did humbly demur that he was reading the novel in Italian translation. It should not have surprised me, though, if he had been making his way through the Russian original.

After dropping off the tuna, I, along with my companion, entered the Frascara building. We went directly to the first-floor chapel (again, second floor, if you count like an American). After a brief visit to the Blessed Sacrament (it was a pilgrimage, after all), we exited the chapel and headed up to the terrace. The Frascara building has one story less than the Palazzo Centrale. It also sits slightly lower on the slope of the piazza that gently rises toward the Quirinal hill. Consequently, it does not command the same sweeping view of the Eternal City that the main building’s terrace affords. One might think, therefore, that the view from Frascara would be inferior. But such is not the case. True enough, the vast panoramic view from the Palazzo Centrale is awe-inspiringly majestic. But the view from the Frascara terrace, nestled among the various neighborhood palazzi, has a charm all its own. From my perch on the Palazzo Centrale, I gaze down on the rooftops and domes of Rome. But on the Frascara terrace, I experienced those same buildings more intimately. From that angle, even my perch behind that papal tiara on the façade of the Palazzo Centrale, though quite exposed, appeared rather cozy. What a difference only a slight change of perspective can make! The garden terrace of the Biblical Institute no longer seemed distant—like a remote valley viewed from a mountain top. The Jesuits strolling among the roses had become companions at recreation rather than objects under observation. The other terraces surrounding the Piazza della Pilotta and down the Via dei Lucchessi formed a neighborhood of rooftop residences rather than vegetative trim outlining the buildings on the block. Even St. Peter’s Basilica seemed to have miraculously leapt forward—its façade somehow more clearly defined. My view of Rome under quarantine had notably shifted from the third-person omniscient to a first-person perspective.

As I looked toward the roof of the Casa Santa Maria located immediately to the west of the Frascara building, I saw an Australian doctoral student of mine who had been unable to vacate the premises when the Americans did. The sound of military helicopters circling overhead had drawn him up to his roof. “Father Christian,” I called out. Obviously surprised, he walked over to greet me. We chatted for a while—our first chat in seven weeks even though we both live on the same piazza in the heart of Rome. What a delightful chat it was from rooftop to rooftop separated by an alley that guaranteed proper social distancing! The delight came not so much from the content of our conversation than from the very fact of the conversation itself. For we didn’t do much more than catch up and share common experiences of quarantine. But we spoke—we spoke directly, not via skype, zoom or even the telephone. No. *We* spoke.

Technology has enabled continued communication between family, friends, business associates, students and teachers in quarantine. True enough. I am by no means ungrateful. I have always enjoyed a good phone call myself. During my early years of Jesuit formation, my mother always used to thank God for the wonders of the telephone. In the days before email, when I was a theology

student in Cambridge, Massachusetts, I wrote weekly—real letters!—to my widowed father until he informed me that he would prefer a phone call. So I certainly can't dismiss the telephone. But the telephone and other digital forms of communication are never a substitute for direct personal contact. Perhaps the present global quarantine has served as a reminder to all those who over the past years have preferred to text rather than talk that there is no real substitute for personal exchanges. To be in the presence of another warms the heart in a way that no hand-held device ever can.

Over the past two months, I have, nonetheless, made great strides in my use of technology. Never before inclined to engage in on-line teaching, I have had no choice but to do so under quarantine. I do confess that I look forward to my weekly appointment with the students of my patristics seminar. What a joy it is just to see their faces and to hear their voices via zoom. I am also able to interact via email with the students of my patrology class. The other day I sent them a few “postcards” from my pilgrimage. A number of them have written back in order to express their gratitude. They were happy to see images of their Alma Mater Mother Greg. For during the quarantine, even those remaining in Rome have been unable to come anywhere near the university. As I noted above, I am not ungrateful for what technology provides. But I have also come to see its limits—very real limits that no future technological advances will ever overcome.

On-line teaching doesn't really do much more than pass on information like a baton in a relay race. Even on-line discussions, no matter how sophisticated, don't accomplish much else. Yes, everyone gets to have his say. But education is so much more than just passing on information. Authentic education involves communicating the truth in a holistic manner, guiding students into the light of knowledge, encountering the other as a person, engaging in real dialogue, forming with one's students a scholarly community dedicated to the pursuit of the truth, and inspiring them to pursue it for the rest of their lives. Stripped of that community, on-line teaching becomes nothing more than a digitalized race whose runners drop the baton every time that the internet goes down.

I'll grant you that zoom sessions do relieve our isolation to a certain extent, and for that I am grateful. But they are incapable of offering a post-seminar cup of tea where, as a former student of mine once said, the real seminar begins. I have always told my students that the hour and a half that we spend together in the classroom is just the cappuccino that one enjoys when sitting with friends in the Piazza Navona. But the actual seminar is much more than just that cup of cappuccino. It is rather the very act of sitting with friends. It is the conversations about the weekly readings that take place at breakfast, lunch and dinner in the respective national colleges and Religious houses of Rome. It is the debates that occur when walking through Rome's piazzas on the way to the university. It is a matter of struggling through the intricacies of Saint Augustine's grace theology while strolling past the Pantheon that the good Bishop of Hippo himself had once entered. It is going to Fossanova to celebrate Mass in the medieval Abbey Church and to pray afterwards in the infirmary cell where Saint Thomas Aquinas died. It is to go on pilgrimage to Gaeta and to offer the Eucharist in the *Cappella d'Oro* dedicated to Mary Immaculate where Pope Blessed Pius IX contemplated the dogmatic definition of Our Lady's sinless conception. It is to read there on site *Ubi Primum*, the 1849 encyclical that Pius IX promulgated from his exile in Gaeta in order to inquire among the worldwide Catholic episcopate about the laity's Marian faith and devotion. For all that it offers, especially now during the COVID-19 crisis, technology is no substitute for these experiences. On-line education just has us looking at a screen. The virtual can never be real. On the other hand, real education builds a community in pursuit of the truth that sets our hearts and minds on fire. When you're dealing with

your computer, the last thing that you want is a fire! My brief exchange with Father Christian stimulated these thoughts, and it reminded me of all that I presently miss.

After we took our leave of Father Christian, my fellow pilgrim and I strolled back and forth on the terrace as prayed our rosary and contemplated the joyful mysteries of our salvation. We offered the fourth mystery, the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple, for all who suffer from anxiety and depression amid the COVID-19 crisis. May the Christ Child's light dispel their darkness.

Once we had finished our prayers, we decided to sit down for a while at a garden-set of table and chairs nestled among flowering potted plants in a small alcove formed by the structure covering the stairway that leads to the terrace. We mused about the Italian decrees regulating our quarantine, struggling to discern what phase two and phase three will or will not actually allow. Our discussion brought a smile to my face. For it provided me with another example of a phenomenon that I had observed many years ago. You can tell a lot about a culture from the words that its native language bequeaths to other languages. Think about it. What Italian words has the English language adopted? Spaghetti, linguini, pasta, pizza and lasagna! Even the occasional “*Ciao, bello!*” rolls off the lips of the more sophisticatedly affected English speaker—like the rather sappy *cara sposa* and *caro sposo* of the newly wedded Eltons in *Emma*. Clearly, Italian culinary culture has enriched our own. What words have made their way from English into Italian? Serial killer, rigging (as in elections), and now lockdown!—the latter, by the way, inevitably pronounced with two extra vowels: *lock-ka-down-na*. What does that tell you about Anglo-American culture, or at least how it is perceived?!? Now, the Italians have a perfectly good word for quarantine—*quarantena*. In fact, in the Middle Ages, the Italians were the ones who invented quarantine—forty days (*quaranta giorni*) of isolation imposed on foreign vessels entering port. Those forty days are a conscious biblical allusion to the forty days that Our Lord spent in the desert. But for whatever reason these days, even in their official governmental documents, the Italians prefer “lockdown.” Might it be a sign of creeping secularism? Whatever the case maybe, a rose by any other name is still a rose. Whether it be quarantine or lockdown, we still haven't been able to leave the building.

In order to console us Romans in our lockdown on Liberation Day (irony of all ironies!), the Italian Air Force sent the *Tricolore* Squadron to fly over the rooftops and domes of Rome and fill the brilliantly blue sky with the green, white and red of the Italian flag. As my fellow pilgrim and I spoke of those regulatory decrees, we suddenly heard military jets approaching from the south. Nine fighter jets scraped the Colosseum and the Roman Forum as they flew toward the Vittore Emmanuelle Monument lording over the Piazza Venezia on their way up the Via del Corso. Streams of green, white and red kerosene-fueled smoke followed in their wake. The smoke was so thick that it even blocked the sun and cast a shadow over the city. What joy their approach evoked! We stood to greet them. I waved my arms in the air and shouted, “Forza Italia!”—quarantine had yet again aroused my Italian patriotism. The squadron made its way north over the Piazza del Popolo and up the Via Flaminia. They circled back and made another pass over the historic center—this time directly over the Quirinal Palace. Bursting with enthusiasm I let out another “Forza Italia!” A few days later I learned that the US Blue Angels had recently brought similar joy to New Yorkers in lockdown. May we, like Serge, never allow COVID-19 to take away our joy.

On Thursday strawberries arrived in the Jesuit community refectory. I always tell my students that when the strawberries arrive it is time to begin studying for exams. When the cherries arrive at the very end of May, it is too late to begin if you haven't already. The cherries are also an annual sign

of hope for me. For their arrival means that within the month I will be on an airplane for the United States. Each summer I enjoy a few months of rest during which I am able to dedicate more time to my own reading and writing along with, of course, visits to family, friends and my fellow Jesuits. I do hope that this year's cherries, when they arrive, will herald the same.

My immediate hope, however, is for this coming Monday. For on May 4<sup>th</sup> phase two is scheduled to begin. It holds the promise of a walk outside the university walls—a walk far longer than the short stretch across the piazza to Frascara! While on the stationary bike the other day, I was glad to read that Jane Austen concurs with me on the merits of phase two. The English novelist places her critique on the lips of Mrs. Elton, the newly wedded Augusta Hawkins, who in addressing Miss Emma Woodhouse, says: “I am no advocate for entire seclusion. I think, on the contrary, when people shut themselves up entirely from society, it is a very bad thing; and that it is much more advisable to mix in the world in a proper degree, without living in it either too much or too little.” A leisurely walk to the Villa Borghese, properly masked, should satisfy the latter. On the way I intend to stop at the altar of Our Lady of the Miracle in the Church of Sant’Andrea delle Fratte and offer a prayer of thanksgiving for Her protection and intercession during these lock-downed days of the soon-to-be-concluded phase one.

Finally, may I leave you with the words of Saint Teresa of Jesus—words to which I have often turned in prayer, especially these days?

**Let nothing disturb you,**

**Let nothing frighten you,**

**All things pass,**

**God does not change,**

**Patience**

**Attains to all things;**

**He who possesses God**

**Lacks nothing:**

**God alone suffices.**

Peace!

Fraternally in the merciful Heart of the Risen Lord Jesus,  
Father Joseph Carola, S.J.

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8 May 2020  
*Rome in phase two*

Dear family and friends,

Pax Christi

Even under quarantine Rome is itself a perch from which one sees the whole world. Day after day word reaches me of the joys and sufferings of family members, friends and former students. At table in the community refectory, I learn from my Jesuit confreres of the developments in their native lands. Contrary to those all-too-common anti-Roman prejudices found even in the Church, the Roman reality is anything but provincial, especially during these days of COVID-19.

A young priest in rural Cuba ordained not even a year has written to share his frustration. Like the Catholic clergy across the globe, he cannot minister directly to his parishioners. As you can imagine, live-streaming Masses is hardly an option in the Cuban campo. For neither he nor his parishioners have the resources to produce and receive such transmissions. But he does what he can spiritually to support them in their sorrow. Just the other day, a Brazilian Jesuit Father from the Amazon region, who lives in my community, spoke of mass graves in Manaus. A Mexican confrere related that, on May 5<sup>th</sup>, *Cinco de Mayo*, approximately eighty priests of the Mexican College, who had persevered within the walls of their collegiate compound throughout phase one, departed Rome for Mexico on the only flight that they could find—a charter flight heading to Cancun to repatriate a group of Italian tourists. The Mexican Bishops called their priests home because they fear that Mexico will soon close its borders.

At the breakfast table, another Jesuit recounted a video put together by Belgian youth pleading with their Bishops to reopen their churches and to provide renewed access to the Sacraments. These young Walloons and French-speakers lament how the tables have been presently turned—how the sheep must now go in search of the shepherds who have closed the sheep gate to the flock. From Dallas, Texas, a dear, anguished friend wrote in a similar vein: “Has the Church ever seen anything like this before even in times of famine and plagues—to shut down the Sacraments when we need them most?” But I have also learned of the courageous ministry of priests in Massachusetts and New Jersey who have been permitted to anoint the dying. They risk their own health in order to offer the Church’s Last Rites and to bring the spiritual fortitude of that Extreme Unction to those who would otherwise die alone in medical isolation.

Many of my students, past and present, work in food banks across Europe and North America. A Sister of Life in New York City provides food for unwed mothers and their newborn babies saved from the abortion mills. Seminarians in Scotland and on Long Island distribute food at parish food pantries. In the spirit of Dorothy Day and Madeleine Delbrêl, a consecrated laywoman labors among the poor at a parish in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where the newly unemployed due to the COVID-19 economic crisis find a warm and dignified welcome. Through these selfless servants, the good Lord provides. Thanks to them, the hungry need not worry about what they are to eat.

On another front in the COVID-19 crisis, the Religious Sisters in Spain, whom I have mentioned before, report that their sick are well along the road to recovery. Even their once gravely ill Sister in Granada, though still hospitalized, is out of the ICU. One Italian student’s father, who had

been intubated, is now back at home and tending to his garden. But the Italian doctor from the Abruzzi, whose daughter I taught, remains in intensive care. From a monastery in the Syrian desert, a nun, who had participated in my patristics seminar, has shared the challenges that she faces on account of not only the present global health crisis, but also the long-suffering of her people. On Friday, May 1<sup>st</sup>, her hometown, plagued like the rest of us by COVID-19, woke up to the sounds of bombs and invading troops. How much more can that people endure?

The view from Rome enables me to suffer and rejoice with the Universal Church. It has also given me cause to reflect yet once again on the gift of faith. I have often wondered how anyone manages to live without faith not only during life's critical moments, but also amid its daily struggles. How do the faithless, for example, get out of bed in the morning when even the believer likes to linger? Saint Josemaría Escrivá counselled his disciples to practice the "heroic minute", that is, to begin the day well by leaping out of bed at the first sound of the alarm. I must confess that in my weakness I have tended to favor the contemplative quarter hour. But whether we leap to our feet or slide them into our slippers, the question remains: why do we get out of bed in the morning, especially when it seems that only trials and tribulations await us throughout the day? Even at the best of times, life can be monotonous. Sleep, eat, work—wash and repeat until various disabilities interrupt the cycle and death brings it to an end. Maybe that bumper sticker was right after all: "Life's a ... (well, you remember), and then you die." We must ask ourselves: does life on earth really have no other purpose than to suffer and to die? Is all just vanity, as Qohelet says? (cf. Ecclesiastes 1:2) Do we toil in vain? Is our labor nothing more than "a striving after wind" (Ecclesiastes 1:17)? Should we not, therefore, just eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die (cf. Ecclesiastes 5:18)? No one cannot escape Qohelet's questions—not even a person of faith! For they are, in fact, the divinely inspired words of Sacred Scripture. They stick to our souls like honey on our hands.

For the faithless the apparent answers are devastating. They draw them into an abyss of meaninglessness. Perhaps for this reason many simply avoid asking these questions altogether. They prefer, rather, to numb themselves with alcohol, drugs and marijuana. These faithless souls pass through life in a daze and die. Of them that bumper sticker sadly speaks. The person of sober faith, however, fears neither life's questions nor their answers. For by those questions, he discovers life's purpose, and in the answers he meets Jesus. In His very Person, Jesus reveals the true meaning of our life—a life that begins in pilgrimage and finds its fulfillment in our heavenly homeland. To look upon Jesus is to see the Father in whose house we hope to dwell forever. On this account, Jesus counsels, "Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me" (John 14.1).

Why do we exist? We exist for the sake of love. God has loved us into existence and invites us to love Him in return. Jesus formulates His precise answer to life's fundamental question in terms of a new commandment. We are to love one another as He Himself has loved us, that is, to love another to the point of laying down our lives for our friends and, indeed, even our enemies. It is important to note that Jesus doesn't simply command us to love. He also gives us the grace—the ability—to love as He did. In answering the question, He also empowers us to cooperate with Him in crafting its response.

It is, then, on account of love that we get out of bed in the morning. However we do so, whether heroically or contemplatively, we begin each day confident that the new day will bring opportunities, both great and small, to love. The person of faith realizes that even the smallest act of charity counts greatly in the eternal scheme of things. For when we come to the end of our pilgrimage,

it is only love that we can take with us. And who among us wishes to leave this life impoverished? When we stand before the Judgment Seat of God, the Just Judge will ask us only one question: how have we loved? What will be our response? Well, that depends on why we get out of bed every morning. It is as simple as that.

Faith is a precious gift. God gives us this gift through the Christian community, most especially through our parents who are our first teachers in the faith. My own parents began their lives during the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918-1919. My father, James Lawrence Carola, was three years old when it broke out. My mother, Mary Inez Gilmartin, was born just after its second, more deadly wave had hit. Pittsburgh, in whose boroughs they lived, did not suffer to the extent that Philadelphia did—one of the cities hardest hit in the United States. As one Pennsylvanian, living in Rome, recently observed, “well, that’s because the Pennsylvania turnpike didn’t exist then.” Whatever the case may be, my parents escaped that deadly disease that had targeted the young. They grew up in the same Catholic parish, Saint Aloysius, in Wilmerding, Pennsylvania—but their homes were on opposite sides of the railroad tracks. My father was a passionate Italian who never spoke in hushed tones. My mother was a lovely Irish woman whose gentle selfless ways moved the hearts of all who met her. They were both devout Catholics who loved one another dearly even if my father’s passionate nature may have occasionally gotten the better of him. He did mellow, though, with age. I always loved him. But, in his final years, I could honestly say that he had also become my best friend.

When I was a very little boy, my mother taught me my prayers at night as I lay in bed before falling asleep. I would repeat after her the words of the *Our Father* and the *Hail Mary*. I remember quite distinctly the night when she first taught me how to pray to Our Lady. “Now say after me,” she said, “Hail, Mary.” “Oh,” I innocently remarked, “isn’t that what Daddy always says? *Hell, Mary!*” Mother laughed. “No, Joey, it’s *Hail*, not *hell*”—an important distinction that I have not forgotten.

In our backyard, we had a statue of Our Lady of Grace—the same image that is on the Miraculous Medal. As a boy I would stand before that statue and pray. During these days of COVID-19, I am most grateful to my mother for having instilled within me a deep devotion to the Mother of God in whose intercession I remain ever confident. Along with life itself, my mother could have given me no greater gift than to share with me her faith in God and her devotion to His Mother. I benefitted as well from my father’s strong, constant witness to his own Catholic faith. His devotion to the Eucharist on Sundays and throughout the week stands out most clearly in my mind. He also shared with me and my siblings his great devotion to Saint Jude. He kept a relic of the holy Apostle on his person and would regularly take it out for us to venerate. We would pass it among ourselves, and, at our father’s insistence, venerate it with a kiss. Such memories sustain me now. In fact, they are not simply memories, but rather bonds of living faith that unite me with my deceased parents in the communion of saints. The Catholic faith that my parents handed on to me makes it easy every morning to get out of bed.

On Monday, May 4<sup>th</sup>, Italy entered phase two of its COVID-19 response. Italy’s phase two is the United States’ phase one. (Will we ever coordinate our counting?) A torturous seventy-page document filled with Italian neologisms governs phase two’s implementation. By the time one masters that document, phase three will have taken its place. To simplify matters for me, one young Sardinian priest has suggested that phase two is really nothing more than phase one in short sleeves. We can go for walks now, and the public parks are open again. But most other restrictions remain in place. My



local Religious superior has asked that we request his permission whenever we hope to venture out beyond the university's walls. For ours is an intergenerational community with elderly members who are at risk. Our concern, therefore, cannot simply be for our individual selves. It must always be communitarian. The poor Salesian Fathers, for example, remain in an extended, draconian lockdown on the grounds of their own Roman university because thirty-nine of their members tested positive for COVID-19 in recent weeks. Five have been hospitalized, and one sixty-seven-year-old priest, God rest him, has died. Given these communitarian concerns, I wear the Miraculous Medal outside my clerical shirt not only for myself, but indeed for my entire community, imploring Our Lady to wrap us all in Her mantle.

On Monday morning, I wasted no time in asking my superior for permission to go for a walk—a permission that he graciously granted. I put on my surgical mask and headed out the front door into the Piazza della Pilotta for only the second time in two months. It was a warm, gloriously sunny Spring day in Rome—the kind of day that Romans always look forward to throughout the year. After months of severely limited motorized traffic, the Roman air, moreover, was remarkably clean. Only a handful of people meandered through the streets. Among them, however, I even spied several tourists as I made my way toward the Trevi Fountain. Had they, too, been quarantined in Rome for the past two months? These latter folks lingered to photograph the fountain whose crystal clear waters cascaded down in translucent sheets from the graded pools at Oceanus' feet. Those pristine waters flowed rapidly into the grand basin below whose bottom for the moment no coinage covers. The sun's brilliant rays reflected in those cascading waters caused them to sparkle with solar diamonds. The rushing waters themselves roared—no longer silenced by a polyglot crowd's din. For no more than twenty people, including the soldiers and local police, wandered through the square.

I did not stay, but rather made my way directly to the Church of Sant'Andrea delle Fratte. Its doors were wide open. A posted sign permitted the masked to enter and pray. But it forbade entrance to tourists not for any liturgical reason (there are still no public Masses), but rather on account of a governmental decree. I should have found that prohibition strange had I not seen tourists at the Trevi. As I walked into the church's cool, baroque nave, I beheld an elderly woman alone at her prayers before the Lady Altar. I strategically knelt down behind her some three pews away. I took out my rosary and began to pray. Meditating on the joyful mysteries, I thanked Our Lady for Her intercession and protection during these truly tremendous days.

Having said my beads, I went to a nearby grocery store—the COOP it's called. A guard stood at the entrance more concerned about how many people entered the fresh-fruit section than the store itself. When I told him that I wasn't looking to purchase any fruit, he let me in. I had half expected to find empty shelves and shell-shocked employees, masked and gloved, behind plexiglass. Well, the employees were properly outfitted, and plexiglass did shield them at the cash registers. But they didn't seem to be particularly distraught. The shelves, moreover, were well stocked. I grabbed various high-fructose-corn-syrup-free jams and a few other items in order to restock my pre-quarantine stash. I skipped the tinned salmon, though, since I have more than enough to last me until the next quarantine—*libera nos, Domine!* But I did buy an eight-pack of tinned tuna for Serge.

You may recall that I had hoped to go all the way to the Villa Borghese on my first outing. But caution got the better part of me. So I made my way back to the Piazza della Pilotta, stopping on my return briefly at the Trevi Fountain. I wanted to stand where my mother had once stood and say

a *Hail Mary* for her and my father. With grocery bags in hand, I closed my eyes. It was a moment of simple joy. But it quickly morphed into the theater of the absurd. As I stood there, a deep, masculine voice addressed me: “*Caro! Buongiorno!*” I opened my eyes and, to my surprise, beheld John the Baptist of sorts! A swarthy, darkly tanned, forty-something man strolled by in front of me. He wore a cowhide mini-toga draped over his right shoulder, belted at his waist and cut off raggedly just above his knees. He had secured his thick black hair with a snake-skin band. Around his neck hung a wooden-beaded chain that dangled halfway down his chest. Similarly crafted bracelets adorned his wrists. Of course, he wore no surgical mask. They probably don’t come in cowhide. On his feet he wore sandals decorated with feathers, an accessory more suitable for the Greek god Hermes than any biblical figure. He walked with a large, wooden staff in his right hand. His left hand held onto a leash attached to two feisty Chihuahuas. You can’t make this stuff up! Some think Federico Fellini, the Roman cinematographer, was a genius. But I’m more convinced that he simply set up his tripod and camera on the streets of Rome and let the film roll. After the Baptist had greeted me, he popped his head into the pharmacy next to where I stood. He saluted the young pharmacist, “*Cara! Buongiorno!*”, and continued along his way. Moments later, an utterly amazed pharmacist leaned out the door to get a better look. “Bizarro!” I said. “Yes,” she agreed—her surgical mask, no doubt, covering her open mouth. The crazies are definitely out these days. But, then, who of us didn’t go a bit stir crazy over the last two months?

Before reentering the university, I visited Serge and gave him that tinned-tuna eight-pack. He received it gratefully and insisted that it would last him two weeks. I asked him how he had fared during the quarantine. The first two weeks were rough, he confessed. For there was no one out and about, and hence no one with whom he could speak. When I had first met Serge, I learned that he suffers most when he has no one to talk to. Living on the street, depending on others for basic amenities and sleeping in a cardboard box are not among Serge’s woes. In fact, he remarked that during the national lockdown he had been better off than the rest of us because he had not been confined to a building. He definitely had a point there! No, Serge suffers when he has no human contact—no one with whom to visit. So, the first two weeks were particularly challenging. But once Serge had established his daily routine, things improved for him as they did for us all. Pointing up to my perch, I told Serge how during the quarantine I would look down on him from above. He had seen someone seated there, he said, but he did not know who it was. “*Ero io,*” I explained, “It was I.” “You should have waved,” he said. Perhaps I should have. So now each morning I call out: “Serge, *buongiorno!*” He looks up, and we exchange two big waves. The barriers that had separated us have begun to fall down.

On Wednesday after pranzo, I walked to St. Peter’s Square. I stood at the iron fence linking the open ends of Bernini’s colonnade. At a distance to my right stood a Religious Sister already donning her white, summer habit. As I gazed at the façade and dome of St. Peter’s Basilica, I recited the Apostles’ Creed. On my way back, I walked past Castel Sant’Angelo and, by way of the Bridge of the Angels, crossed the Tiber where in late antiquity Pope Saint Gregory the Great had seen the Archangel Saint Michael sheathe his sword to mark the end of the plague that had devastated sixth-century Rome. As I approached the Lungotevere, the board thoroughfare that runs alongside the river, I caught sight again of those two Chihuahuas! That man definitely gets around, I thought to myself. But then, he may have thought the same about this priest! On the Via dei Coronari I stopped for a gelato at the Gelateria del Teatro. I ordered a large cup of *stracciatella e fragole* (chocolate chip and strawberry). I would have preferred raspberry, but they had none to offer. I took my gelato to the Piazza Navona. I sat on a marble bench between Borromini’s Church of Saint Agnes and Bernini’s

Fountain of the Four Rivers, and savored my afternoon treat. Perhaps a dozen *Tricolore* flags hung from the balconies surrounding the square. Atop the left bell tower of the Sant’Agnese, one Italian flag flew furiously in the wind. I had the piazza almost entirely to myself—except for the occasional tourist, that is. The Romans, who were out, went about mostly on bicycles. To my surprise, I saw two of those red UBER bicycles go by! So I guess that there is life after COVID-19 even for them. After finishing my gelato, I strolled past the French Church, San Luigi dei Francesi, toward the Pantheon. Along the way I met Father Christian, my Australian doctoral student. We had another chat. Life almost felt normal again. Almost normal, yes, but something was different—in fact, better. For I felt as if I were discovering the Eternal City for the very first time. Joy filled my heart. Rome is indeed the most beautiful city in the world, and COVID-19 will never be able to change that.

To conclude this rather long epistle, I want to share with you the words that Our Lady spoke to Saint Juan Diego at Tepeyac—words that always console me, but these days most especially sustain me.

Hear and let it penetrate into your heart:

Let nothing discourage you, nothing depress you.

Let nothing alter your heart or your countenance.

Do not fear any illness or vexation, anxiety or pain.

Am I not here who am your Mother?

Are you not under my shadow and protection?

Am I not your fountain of life?

Are you not in the folds of my mantle, in the crossing of my arms?

Is there anything else that you need?

Let us keep one another in prayer.

I shall continue to write until the cherries come.

Peace!

Fraternally in the merciful Heart of Jesus,  
Father Joseph Carola, S.J.

A friend in Rome spotted the "Baptist" today. The dogs' names are Mido and Kina!



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16 May 2020  
*Rome in phase two*

Dear family and friends,

Pax Christi

In July of last year—the year that has made the number 19 notorious—I travelled to Scotland for the ordination of two transitional deacons to the priesthood. One of the deacons had been my student at the Gregorian University. The other fellow, however, I had only recently met. My student’s ordination took place on July 3<sup>rd</sup>, the Feast of Saint Thomas the Apostle, in the Motherwell Diocese situated between the Archdioceses of Glasgow and Edinburgh. The other ordination, scheduled six days later, was held on the Island of Benbecula in the Diocese of Argyll and the Isles in northwestern Scotland. Benbecula forms part of a chain of islands off the Scottish mainland called the Outer Hebrides. While the northern Island of Lewis became a Calvinist stronghold during the Reformation, Protestant ministers never managed to get a foothold in the southern islands. Consequently, Benbecula, along with the other southern islands, first evangelized in the earlier Middle Ages, has always been Catholic. In Gaelic, Benbecula means the “Dark Island”. To look at the beautifully bright photographs of Benbecula posted on Wikipedia, one would think the name a misnomer. But such brilliant days are the exception rather than the rule. When my student, ordained less than a week, and I, having driven through the majestic Highlands, took the ferry from Uig on Skye Island across the Little Minch to North Uist, the first of the southern islands, it was a grey, rainy day. Throughout my visit to the Outer Hebrides, I heard the constant refrain, “Oh, it’s a shame that you don’t have nice weather. Benbecula is really quite beautiful in the sun.” But the mist never lifted—if anything, it only grew more dense.

A Scottish seminarian from the mainland observed that Benbecula’s treeless, relatively flat, and cratered terrain looked like a verdant lunar landscape with water. No trees grow there because the eastwardly trade winds blowing mightily across the northern Atlantic don’t give them a chance. A single-track road dissects the island from north to south. Passing places resembling aneurysms on a blood vessel allow the two-way traffic sharing the same single lane to pass one another in fits and starts. Private cars are bad enough, but large touring buses and lorries (trucks for us Americans) also travel along that same route. You can imagine the delays. And then there are the sheep who simply have a mind of their own. When they take to the road, automated traffic has no choice but to stop and wait—not an uncommon occurrence actually, for there are more sheep than people on the island. The islanders number just over one thousand. Their homesteads stand one mile or so apart.

For the ordination of their native son, Benbecula’s Catholics, along with their Protestant neighbors, filled the small, grey-stone Catholic church on a wind-swept knoll amid that verdant lunar landscape. The parish hall held the overflow seated on plastic chairs packed tightly together—a pre-COVID-19 scene if ever there was one! They participated in the Mass via live-streaming—an unbeknownst foretaste of things to come. It was not only the first sacerdotal ordination ever to take place on the island, but indeed the first vocation to the priesthood from the island since its evangelization! The men donned their clan’s green-tartan kilts, and the women wore festive hats. Seemingly conscious that a pastor was being ordained, the sheep gathered in the green pastures alongside the church and audibly baaed their praise during the Eucharistic consecration. At the

conclusion of Mass, the procession exited the church through the front doors. A low stone wall separated the stoop from the verdant pastures beyond where the sheep had assembled to greet the newly ordained. A band of kilted bagpipers formed a color guard on the path leading to the church and honored the new priest with a musical salute. This was Catholic Scotland at its best.

Now you may be asking yourselves: what do the Outer Hebrides have to do with Rome under quarantine? The answer is quite simple. During the ordination Mass, the Bishop of Argyll and the Isles greeted all those watching via live-streaming who had hoped to be present, but were impeded from coming because earlier that day a dense fog had forced the cancellation of the daily flight from Glasgow. As it turned out, there was not a single flight onto or off the Dark Island during my entire stay. I was told, moreover, that there are days when, due to severe weather, even the ferries can't run. This was a new experience for me. Never in my life had been anywhere where there might be no possibility of leaving. The experience seemed surreal—like the *Hotel California* where “You can check out any time you like/ But you can never leave”! In the early days of our Roman quarantine, the US State Department issued repeated health and travel advisories, throwing in for good measure a raised terrorist alert. These advisories grew more dim by the day. As the US government raised the levels of its health-related travel warnings, it simultaneously advised all American citizens to return immediately to the United States. Fewer and fewer flights remained until there was only that one Alitalia to JFK in New York, transporting passengers from one coronavirus hot-stop to another. We were warned that, if we did not depart, we must be prepared to remain in Italy indefinitely. As my fellow Americans left, my anxiety levels rose. Some initially stranded Americans discovered that, even though you could book a flight, you apparently could never leave! Amid the warnings I found myself back on Benbecula, as it were, shrouded in the mist—but this time without any transport to take me to the mainland. After nearly twenty-eight years in Rome, I was not particularly disturbed by the thought of having to remain here indefinitely. But the thought that I could not leave, even though I had no intention of doing so, did alarm me. It was not the first time that such a thought had occurred to me. When a volcano in Iceland disrupted air traffic over Europe for a week in April, 2010, I did think to myself that the day could come when I might no longer be able to fly home. It was a sobering thought. Thankfully, these days, the US government's electronic travel warnings are less dire than before. “Return immediately” and “Be prepared to stay indefinitely” still leap off the screen at me, but the number of commercial flights to the States via other European capitals has slowly begun to increase. And while non-essential travel is still discouraged, returning home always remains an option. So, even though the COVID-19 fog has yet to lift, some ferries still run.

The Outer Hebrides, by the way, are faring quite well amid the present crisis. They have closed themselves off from the mainland and, except for two initial cases back in early March, have remained coronavirus free. Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad just now to be back on Benbecula.

Last Sunday evening my novice classmate and I went out for dinner. Nothing fancy, mind you. We went to the local McDonald's two blocks from the Trevi Fountain and ordered take-out. Phase two has allowed McDonald's to reopen, but under rather severe restrictions. Only one person at a time, properly masked and gloved, can enter the building. Gone are the days—at least for the time being—when Italian youth and culinary homesick Americans packed the McDonald's and formed an imposing gauntlet between any new customer and the touchscreen monitors. Gone are the days as well when you'd dare to touch those screens without wearing plastic gloves. I had gloves on, but my companion did not. So it fell to me to place our order: a Grand Crispy McBacon Menu for my classmate, and two double cheeseburgers without mustard, a bottle of still water and a caramel

sundae for myself. Having no means by which to pay electronically, I had to go to the cash register. In this brave new world of COVID-19, plexiglas shields now separate the customer from the cashier. I fear that for the foreseeable future we are condemned to live life behind plexiglas. But even with the plexiglas, my plastic gloves and surgical mask, I still had to exit the building by the side door and wait outside for my order. I ended up standing next to a row of those abandoned green-bike parking poles. May the plexiglas soon become likewise obsolete. When I asked from the doorway if I could pick up my sundae after I had finished my cheeseburgers, an overly scrupulous employee insisted that I could do so only with my receipt. I suggested that it was quite unlikely that he should so soon forget me. For quite literally I was not just another face in the crowd. Except for the two bicycle-delivery men, I was, in fact, their only customer!

Since eating inside was absolutely out of the question, my confrere and I took our take-out and sat down to dine on two displaced stone columns lying on their sides just across from the McDonald's on a pedestrian walkway that connects the Pantheon and the Trevi Fountain. On any given night street musicians would have normally been entertaining sauntering crowds of tourists gawking at the street vendors' wares. But on Sunday evening those vendors and musicians were notably absent. Only Romans on bicycles and young families with children passed us by as we ate. Some little boys standing at the McDonald's entrance shouted to their parents in that charming cadence of Italian children: "*È aperto! È aperto!*—It's open! It's open!" But to those boys' dismay, their parents were far less interested than they. They simply strolled along their way toward the Trevi Fountain where a small phalanx of local police had mobilized in order to assure that no group gathered in the square. Even though forbidden to form crowds, the *centro storico's* inhabitants have gradually begun to reclaim Rome, making it feel more like a country village than a European capital.

The following morning at 4:00am, booming thunder roused me from my sleep. Flashes of lightning, like strobe lights in a discotheque, sporadically illuminated the predawn darkness. Rain fell heavily outside. Of course, there is nothing more cozy than to slumber in bed during a thunderstorm. So I just rolled over, burrowed more deeply under the covers, and listened with pleasure to the sounds of the storm. It was not long before I dozed off again. An hour later, at 5:03am, to be precise, I woke up trembling like a Parkinson patient on a particularly bad day. Is this how COVID-19 begins? Then, I suddenly realized that not only was I trembling, but that my bed was also shaking, the door creaking and the room moving. It was an earthquake! The epicenter lay only several miles away in a Roman suburb. How quickly the cozy had become apocalyptic!

In previous updates, I have mentioned how over the past several months the Church's liturgy has spoken to me powerfully. The words of Sacred Scripture have leapt off the pages of my breviary and the Roman Missal. They have providentially articulated my present experience in quarantine and deeply inspired my prayer. Truly, these days, the Word of God has again become incarnate. During Lent the Church's biblically grounded lament sowed with seeds of hope became my own. At Easter I sympathized with dumbfounded disciples bathed in paschal glory. Since then, I have found joy in the renewal that the Lord's Passion, Death and Resurrection bring. In the Easter season, the Office of Readings has offered a continuous reading of the Book of Revelation—most appropriately perhaps given COVID-19. But, to be honest, I'd rather not be reminded just now of God's wrath and human woes. As if that general alarm were not enough, the other day, my morning meditation took a particularly personal, existential turn. "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!" I read (Revelation 18:2). Babylon the great, of course, is the "mother of harlots and of earth's abominations" (Revelation 17:5), the woman seated on the seven hills (cf. Revelation 17:9), "the great city which [had] dominion

over the kings of the earth” (Revelation 17:18). In other words, Babylon the great is Rome. Granted, pagan Rome, but nonetheless, Rome. As I read about those seven hills while seated at my perch, I simply glanced up and gazed upon one of them—the Quirinal hill at whose foot the Gregorian University sits. “So shall her plagues come in a single day,” I read, “pestilence and mourning and famine” (Revelation 18:8). “How wonderful!” I thought snarkily to myself. Earlier I had read how, at the breaking of the seventh seal, an angel had taken a golden censer filled with fire and hurled it down upon the earth, “and there were peals of thunder, loud noises, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake” (Revelation 8:5b). Well, that described Monday morning. Thankfully, life has calmed down since then. But these remain trying days. As I wrote not long ago to a friend and fellow Houstonian who has had to weather the present crisis with her husband and children in Madrid: “The good Lord regularly tests our faith in fire in order to purify it. That is what has been happening for so many of us these days. For my part, I have realized, though, that, while I long for Jesus to come again, I have no particular desire to endure the preceding apocalypse. The former, of course, will be a singular joy for those who live to see it, but the latter will take an equally singular grace in order to survive it. At this point I am content with simple joys and simple graces.” There is much to be said for simplicity.

Thanks be to God, my prayer has not been solely apocalyptic. Joy has also figured centrally in my morning meditations. Meditating on joy I have realized that for the Christian true joy never passes away. It is not a fleeting experience even if we may be tempted to think it so. The Evil One despises our joy. He does all that he can to undermine it. You may be joyful now, he whispers in our ear, but you know that it won’t last. Consolation inevitably gives way to desolation, he insists in his attempts to convince us that desolation is our default position. If that were so, then, it’s back to that bumper sticker again. But such is not the case for the Christian. The believer’s default position is joy, not grief. Yes, joy—even in this valley of tears, and indeed most especially in this valley of tears. For even now Christ shares His joy with us so that our joy may be complete. During our earthly pilgrimage, the joy, that Christ bestows on us, may not always be felt. In a book by the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, I once read about Saint Thérèse of Lisieux’s *unfelt* joy—a notion that had stumped me at first. What is *unfelt* joy? I asked myself. Is such joy really joy at all? Even if it were, it hardly seems desirable. But I have come to see that unfelt joy is an unshakeable joy rooted in faith. It is not an emotional, effervescent joy—a seed sown on rock that sprouts quickly but then withers for lack of moisture. If that were the case, then, depression would indeed be our default position. We’d really have no reason to get out of bed in the morning. For how can ephemeral things ever make us truly happy when we spend those nominally happy moments continually worried about their loss? No. Fleeting happiness is no happiness at all. True happiness endures—even though it may at times go unfelt. It is like faith when at its purest is neither intellectually perceived nor emotionally felt, but rather unshakably present as it sustains us amid life’s most bitter trials. It is best recognized in retrospect.

God is joy—eternal joy that knows neither beginning nor end. In Christ Jesus, Divine Joy has become incarnate. Through His Spirit He sows the seeds of enduring joy in our hearts. This gracious gift of joy sanctifies our natural joys—the joys of family life, friends and the created order. These days, for example, oddly enough, even the sound of the jack hammer brings me joy because it speaks, as it were, of the dignity of labor to which the once quarantined man has returned. Of course, natural joys—good in themselves—can be corrupted by sin. Such disordered pleasures only mimic joy. They are those proverbial wolves in sheep’s clothing. Such false joys are those that the Evil One would have us believe are this life’s only joys. In doing so, he attempts to convince us that true joy—lasting joy—simply does not exist. Rather than resigning ourselves to despair, let us reject the Evil One and



all his empty promises. Let us turn to the good Lord whose grace sanctifies the natural joys of our life and roots them in the eternal joy of God Himself. Thus rooted in God they do indeed endure even though they may not always be felt. Deeply desiring our happiness, Jesus shares His joy with us—He makes us partakers of His own divine nature—in order that His joy may be ours and that our joy may be complete.

On Monday morning after the earthquake, I finished *Emma*. Considering how Serge had shamed me back in April, I had thought to delve into Russian literature next. For years I have wanted to read Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*—a notable lacuna in my liberal education. Certainly, after *Les Misérables*, I'm ready for any literary challenge. But the helicopters and drones patrolling Rome have inspired me to pick up George Orwell's *1984*. Did you know that the protagonist keeps a diary?

Tomorrow is my 58<sup>th</sup> birthday—still young according to the risk-category cutoff for COVID-19! I think that I will celebrate with two double cheeseburgers, a bottle of water and a caramel sundae at the local McDonald's.

Let us continue to keep one another in prayer.

Peace!

Fraternally in the Heart of Our Lord,

Father Joseph Carola, S.J.

21 May 2020

Ascension Thursday

*Rome in phase two modified*

Dear family and friends,

Pax Christi

Throughout the month of May, the jasmine vines, intertwined among the trellises on our terrace, have been in full bloom. Delicate white flowers cover the vines' fresh-green leaves like an unseasonably late snow fallen on newly sprouted grass. Their sweet scent perfumes the Roman air. Pink roses, red trumpet lilies, yellow irises, violet bougainvillea, multicolored geraniums and flowering oleanders likewise abound in our rooftop garden. As the city below finally awakens from its quarantined slumber, a renewed creation bursts forth in an array of vibrant colors. The flowers' wafting fragrances evoke memories of other Springs perhaps more pleasant. But in reminding me of the past, they also reassure me in the present and give me hope for the future.

The month of May, dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, begins with the liturgical memorial of Saint Joseph the Worker. The Carpenter of Nazareth witnesses to the dignity of human labor. Every day "man goes forth to his work, to labor till evening falls," the psalmist sings (Psalm 104:23). In these days of COVID-19, however, only those whose work the government initially deemed essential have until now been able to leave their quarantine. As I mentioned in earlier updates, the garbage collectors haven't missed a beat. In fact, in the early days of the lockdown, I often thought that they must be the happiest men and women in Rome. They had a steady job and weren't cooped up in their homes for weeks on end. But most laborers have not been so fortunate. True enough, some have managed to continue their work on-line. For instance, my colleagues and I at the university

have not been unemployed. If anything, our labors have become more demanding because on-line teaching is particularly work-intensive. But other quarantined individuals—the shopkeepers, the cooks, the waiters, the hotel personnel, and the museum guards among so many others—have been *de facto* unemployed, if not officially laid-off. Longing to labor they have been required to shelter at home. For their work was officially declared to be “non-essential”. How long before they begin to think the same about themselves?

I know the owner of several restaurants in the *centro storico*. He has fifty-six employees. Those restaurants have been closed since the beginning of March which means that those fifty-six households have had to go without income for almost three months. As Rome gradually reopens they hope for business. But since their business depends not so much on the local Romans as it does on the droves of tourists that would normally descend upon Rome in the high season, their prospects are slim. One restaurant manager informed me that the Italian government has yet to provide any unemployment benefits or stimulus checks. Posters plastered on storefronts in central Rome express the workers’ desperation: “*Senza aiuti del governo il 18 maggio non possiamo riparire—migliaia di dipendenti a rischio—* Without the government’s help, on May 18<sup>th</sup>, we cannot reopen. Thousands of workers are at risk.” The newly reopened businesses’ long-idling motors may well not turn over without a significant financial jumpstart. I can only hope that economists are laboring as diligently as medical scientists to find a cure for the crisis.

The clergy have not been exempt from the woes of the “non-essential” workforce. In Italy, for example, the government shut down religious services before they closed the discotheques. In at least one civil jurisdiction in the United States, you could go to the liquor store, but not to church. For the sake of public health, the world’s Catholic bishops dutifully complied with governmental orders—even though they did not completely turn a blind eye to the outrageous injustices listed above. Thankfully, as world governments have begun to lift restrictions, the bishops have begun to push back wherever the faithful’s religious needs remain sidelined. But like the long-term effects of COVID-19 on the economy, there are also lingering effects on the clergy who have been made to feel useless. Throughout their seminary formation, they were taught to treasure the Sacraments—most especially, the celebration of daily Mass and the practice of regular confession. But in the present crisis not only civil governments, but sadly even some bishops have effectively told them that their administration of the Sacraments is at best of secondary importance in the life of the Church and for the sake of the world. This is tremendous. In obedience the clergy have obeyed the directives that they have received from their legitimate superiors. And they are to be commended for their obedience. But they have also suffered interiorly, and they continue to suffer.

In their quarantined rectories, priests pray. Behind the parish church’s locked doors, they offer Holy Mass for the intentions of the faithful. Let us not take for granted the power of their sacerdotal prayer. Hopefully, the present crisis has helped the clergy to recommit themselves to praying for their people. In fact, as pastoral activism has increasingly threatened to overwhelm the clergy, especially the younger clergy, I have often said that we priests should do less and pray more. But our pastoral hearts rightly insist on *Ora et Labora*—on the rightful balance of prayer and work. For the clergy, there are many lessons to be learned just now. Perhaps the most important one is the renewal of our zeal for sacramental ministry—to be renewed in our conviction that it is Christ Himself who ministers His saving grace through the Sacraments that we celebrate. The good that can come from the present crisis is a deeper understanding of the incarnational reality of our priesthood and the concomitant

courage to challenge any neo-Docetist who would dare tell us that the Divine Word's ongoing Incarnation in the Church is somehow non-essential.

On Monday, May 18<sup>th</sup>, the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of Pope Saint John Paul the Great, I sat down for pranzo as I have done daily during the quarantine with two confreres at one of the twenty-four tables in our large community refectory. A massive reproduction of the Italian Renaissance artist Domenico Ghirlandaio's *Last Supper* covers nearly half of the refectory's western wall. The original fresco is found in the Dominican Convent of San Marco in Florence. One particular element of Ghirlandaio's rendition of that classic biblical scene has always intrigued me. On the table alongside the bread and wine there are cherries carefully arranged in front of each apostle. Do those cherries symbolize hope for Ghirlandaio as they do for me? I sincerely doubt it. But to see them associated with the Eucharist consoles me. For the Eucharist is the sacramental offering of Christ's unique Sacrifice on the Cross. *Ave, O Crux, Spes Unica!* Hail, O Cross, our one hope! In sum, it seems fitting—does it not?—that those cherries should be there.

The hexagonal tables in our refectory can seat up to six persons, but we have typically limited the seating to five in order to free one side for the serving plates. Pranzo, you see, is customarily served by waiters after our common grace. On weekdays two employees serve table while on Saturdays and Sundays we Jesuits do the service ourselves. During the first two weeks of quarantine, the house custom continued. We sat five to a table for the served midday meal. But when the house support staff could no longer come to work, we implemented a self-service buffet. In order to assure proper social-distancing, we also limited our number at table to three, leaving a meter between each of us. Even though our employees returned to work on Monday of Holy Week, we did not resume our previous practice in the dining room. The new practice, in fact, appeals to many, leading some to suggest that it will remain in place even after the present crisis.

On Monday past, when one of my companions went back to the serving line, the other in mid-sentence suddenly began to choke on a sinewy piece of meat stuck in the back of his throat. I was not immediately concerned. For often when someone chokes at table, the matter seems more serious to those looking on than to the one who is choking knows it to be. But as my confrere struggled to dislodge that piece of meat, I began to fear the worst. I asked him if he were all right. He could not respond verbally. Rather in a panic he gave me a fleeting glance. I leapt to my feet and called out for another confrere who is a medical doctor. But at first in the din of many conversations, no one heard me. Then I yelled: "*Aiuto! Aiuto!*—Help! Help!" Well, that got everyone's attention. The startled Jesuit community stared back at me, and the doctor among us came quickly. He calmly assessed the situation. But before he could act, the choking Jesuit managed with his fingers to pull that piece of meat out of his throat. Having regained his composure, he simply set the remaining meat aside. I remarked to him afterwards that it was a good thing that he had not died. For had he done so the civil authorities might have attributed his death to COVID-19 and shut our house down for another two weeks.

COVID-19 certainly has no monopoly on death. As Saint Thomas More reminds his inquisitors in Robert Bolt's play *A Man for All Seasons*, "Death comes for us all, my Lords, even for kings he comes." There's no escaping it. With or without COVID-19 and with or without a vaccine, the mortality rate for all human beings is 100%. If anything, COVID-19 has caused us to face yet once again our own inevitable mortality. Death does indeed come for us all. The present global crisis has also revealed the outrageous hubris of the so-called Immortality Project that aims to defeat both

aging and death. How can anyone still be so bold as to think that man can engineer his own physical immortality when a mere microbe has succeeded in bringing the entire world to its knees? No. “Death comes for us all, my Lords, even for kings he comes.”

It has been a common practice among Catholics to pray for a good death. By a good death, Catholics mean a death for which one is spiritually prepared through the humble reception of the Sacraments—that is, by making a contrite confession confident in God’s mercy, receiving worthily the Eucharist to sustain us along the way, and being strengthened by the Church’s final anointing for the journey home to the Father’s House. There is, in fact, a Mass for the grace of a happy death in the back of the Roman Missal. “O God, who have created us in your image and willed that your Son should undergo death for our sake,” prays the priest, “grant that those who call upon you may be watchful in prayer at all times, so that we may leave this world without stain of sin and may merit to rest with joy in your merciful embrace.” Even though we may pray for a good death, we all do fear death to some extent or another. That’s natural, but it is by no means sinful. For even Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane knew this natural fear when He prayed: “Father, if you are willing, remove this chalice from me; nevertheless not my will, but yours, be done” (Luke 22:42). Loving the Father unfailingly, Jesus conquered His fear. Our faith in His Resurrection overcomes it. Like Saint Paul we, too, rebuke death now “swallowed up in [Christ’s] victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” (1 Corinthians 15:55)

Yesterday, May 20<sup>th</sup>, marked the first anniversary of the passing of my grade school principal, Sister Rosalia Purcell, C.V.I., in Houston, Texas. She was 97 years old. I loved Sister Rosalia very much, and I have always attributed my Religious vocation to her own faithful, steadfast witness in the Religious life. Every summer during my home visit, I would visit with Sister Rosalia at the Incarnate Word Motherhouse next to Saint Vincent de Paul Catholic Church where I was baptized, made my first confession and received my first Holy Communion. In fact, I’d see her most mornings for Mass and breakfast. She and I always prayed for one another. For my part, I offered a daily *Hail Mary* for her. She informed me that she had made a deal with God that whenever she thought about anyone that very remembering would be her prayer for him. Since she kept a photograph of me in her room, I am confident that I benefitted continually from her prayers. “Father Joey,” she would say, “stay close to the Lord.” Sister Rosalia fell ill on Thursday, May 16<sup>th</sup>, 2019, the eve of my 57<sup>th</sup> birthday. The doctors thought that she would die the following day. But she held on until the wee hours of Monday morning in Houston. I only learned about her final illness on Sunday evening in Rome. But the good Lord, mindful of the deal that Sister had once struck with Him, had mercifully included me in the bargain.

On Saturday, May 18<sup>th</sup>, as Sister Rosalia lay dying, I went on a day-trip with a group of seminarians to the Amalfi coast. Because of rough seas, we could not take the boat from Salerno to Amalfi, sailing past that dramatic coastline of steep, rugged, but nonetheless lush-green mountains plunging down into the Mediterranean Sea. So we piled into two 10-seater taxis and drove along that tortuous road cutting harrowingly across those same steep slopes—a drive, I can assure you, not for the faint of heart! While making our way to Amalfi, I was inspired for some reason or another to share with the seminarians in my van Sister Rosalia’s vocation story. That story began at the Sacred Heart altar in Dublin’s Pro-Cathedral just after the Second World War. Never before had I recounted Sister’s story to my students. It is true that recalling that story and others about her did take my mind off those hair-pin curves precariously skimming the edge of those treacherous cliffs against whose base the Mediterranean’s white-capped waves lapped.

Back in Rome, the following evening, when I read the Sister Superior's email informing me that my dear friend was dying, I was immediately struck by how the good Lord had united us spiritually over the weekend. He had powerfully placed Sister Rosalia in my heart, and by my remembering her He had assured that I had prayed for her in her great need. Early the following morning, May 20<sup>th</sup>, I offered Holy Mass for Sister Rosalia. Given the seven-hour time difference between Houston and Rome, Sister was still alive then. Some hours later I entered the classroom, and, as the 10:30am bell rang, I promptly led my students in a *Hail Mary* for Sister Rosalia as she lay dying. Later that same day, the Sister Superior in Houston wrote to me: "Thanks for your prayers for Sr. Rosalia. She died at 3:30am today, May 20." Given that seven-hour time difference, 3:30am in Houston was 10:30am in Rome—the very moment at which my students and I had been praying.

For many years I had offered that daily *Hail Mary* for Sister Rosalia. Now, the good Lord in His Providence had given me the singular grace of offering a final *Hail Mary* for my dearest friend not only at the hour of her death, but indeed at the very moment that she passed. See how the good Lord cares for us until the end. See how the Blessed Mother does indeed pray for us now and at the hour of our death. Those who live their lives in the Lord have no reason to fear death, beyond, that is, that natural fear that even Jesus experienced, because the faithful, who have remained close to the Lord, never approach death alone. In His merciful love, God Himself welcomes us home as the Blessed Mother, along with all the angels and saints, accompanies us into paradise.

As foreseen, this past May 18<sup>th</sup>, the Italian government did modify its COVID-19 phase two restrictions. The more Thomistically minded might be inclined to say that we are now in the *Secunda Secundae*—part two of part two. The relaxed restrictions allow for greater openness. The university library, for example, has reopened to a limited number of students—no more than seventy-five in the morning and again seventy-five in the afternoon. Confined to his portico, Serge had been greatly looking forward to Monday and the additional freedoms that it has brought. "I'll come back here only to sleep at night," he said with a notable sigh of relief.

"Where will you go during the day?" I asked.

"*La Biblioteca Nazionale di Roma sul Viale Castro Pretorio*," he replied, "The National Library of Rome on Castro Pretorio Street. I am eager to return to my writing."

"What are you writing?" I inquired.

"A study of the false accusations made against Caravaggio."

So Serge is not only on top of contemporary Russian literature, but he also knows a thing or two about baroque art history! Well, he is, after all, a hermit-scholar who lives on the streets of Rome. Since Serge rises quite early every morning, I no longer see him seated in his portico when I arrive at my perch. I do miss him. Nonetheless, his absence is paradoxically consoling. For it signals a certain return to normalcy. Still, surgical masks, latex gloves and social distancing continue to characterize the new world to which Rome has awakened. All three help, of course, to limit contagion. But social distancing also has an added, although perhaps unintended benefit. It hinders the pickpockets.

I would like to conclude this update with a prayer, *An Act of Hope*, composed by my Jesuit confrere Saint Claude La Colombière. He was the confessor of Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque to whom Our Lord revealed the mysteries of His Sacred Heart. I first came across this prayer during my novitiate in Grand Coteau, Louisiana, some four decades ago. It has remained with me ever since, and it has carried me through some of the greatest trials of my Jesuit life.

My God, I am so convinced that you keep watch over those who hope in you, and that we can want for nothing when we look for all from you, that I am resolved in the future to live free from every care, and to turn all my anxieties over to you. “In peace I lie down and at once fall asleep, for it is you and none other, Lord, who make me rest secure” (Psalm 4:8).

Men may deprive me of possessions and of honor; sickness may strip me of strength and the means of serving you: I may even lose your grace by sin; but I shall never lose my hope. I shall keep it till the last moment of my life, and at that moment all the demons in hell shall strive to tear it from me in vain. “In peace I lie down and at once fall asleep.”

Others may look for happiness from their wealth or their talents; others may rest on the innocence of their life, or the severity of their penance, or the amount of their alms, or the fervor of their prayers. “It is you and none other, Lord, who make me rest secure.” As for me, Lord, all my confidence is my confidence itself. This confidence has never deceived anyone. No one, no one has hoped in the Lord and been confounded.

I am sure, therefore, that I shall be eternally happy since I firmly hope to be, and because it is from you, O God, that I hope for it. “In you, Lord, I have taken refuge, let me never be put to shame” (Psalm 31:1). I know, alas! I know only too well, that I am weak and unstable. I know what temptation can do against the strongest virtue. I have seen the stars of heaven fall, and the pillars of the firmament; but that cannot frighten me. So long as I continue to hope, I shall be sheltered from all misfortune; and I am sure of hoping always, since I hope also for this unwavering hopefulness.

Finally, I am sure that I cannot hope too much in you, and that I cannot receive less than I have hoped for from you. So I hope that you will hold me safe on the steepest slopes, that you will sustain me against the most furious assaults, and that you will make my weakness triumph over my most fearful enemies. I hope that you will love me always, and that I too shall love you without ceasing. To carry my hope once for all as far as it can go, I hope from you to possess you, O my Creator, in time and in eternity. Amen.

Let us continue to keep one another in prayer through Our Lady’s intercession. May She wrap us in the folds of Her mantle as She places us in the Heart of Her Son. Once there, we may, as a dear friend once exhorted me, not allow even a toenail to protrude out.

Peace!

Faternally in the merciful Heart of Jesus, risen from the dead and ascended into heaven,  
Father Joseph Carola, S.J.



detail of Domenico Ghirlandaio's *Last Supper* in the Dominican Convent of San Marco in Florence

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