Parish Endeavors Keep Parishioners Engaged in the Faith in Times of Isolation

By Jen Reed
The Catholic Witness

On a rainy Saturday afternoon, Father Thomas Rozman and Father Tim Sahd arrived at the portico of St. Joseph Church in Mechanicsburg and looked at the line of cars idling in the parking lot.

It was the parish’s second offering of drive-through Confessions, and from the number of people waiting to pull their vehicles up to where the priests were seated beneath the portico, it would be a busy hour and a half.

“We have a desire to be in touch with our parishioners. While there is social distancing, there is not spiritual distancing,” said Father Rozman, pastor. “We want to remain close to them spiritually. That calls us to be as creative as possible.”

The set-up was rudimentary, but it allowed penitents to receive the sacrament while adhering to social distancing guidelines before Cumberland County was given stay-at-home orders. Members of the Knights of Columbus directed traffic flow in the parking lot. The faithful remained in their cars while communicating with the priest, who sat several feet away from their drivers’ side window. For cars with more than one person, penitents sat on a chair under the portico, more than six feet away from the confessor.

Ramona Fritschi was among those who took advantage of the sacrament.

“Under normal circumstances, we have the opportunity to attend penance services offered throughout the Diocese. With the closing of parishes, that was a sacrament I didn’t think we’d have available to us at this very important time of year,” she said. “I was so relieved to learn that we had an opportunity to participate in the penance service as a drive through! I let friends from other parishes know this was available, and they participated as well. The Knights of Columbus managed the traffic and it was just a great experience all around.”

“St. Joseph Parish has been so great at thinking out of the box during this time,” Fritschi remarked. “They were the first that I know of to offer a live stream of Sunday Mass and then providing the opportunity to participate in the Sacrament of Reconciliation in drive-through format. They have really been thinking out of the box and have tried to bring our parish together during this difficult time, and especially during our holy time of Lent when we are so anxious to keep our Lenten promises which may include daily Mass, the Rosary and Stations of the Cross.”

On Sundays, the parish streams one Mass on Facebook, while a second is recorded and posted to YouTube; one is interpreted by Father Rozman in Sign Language for the deaf community. To connect to the several hundred elderly members of the parish, volunteers are making phone calls to reach out, to pray and to ask if they need assistance. And almost daily, the priests reach out via videos on social media, which have offered special messages for students and lessons on the Sanctuary Candle and the vestments worn on Laetare Sunday.

“We want people to know that the liturgical life of the Church continues, whether we have a few or a few thousand,” Father Rozman

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Christ, our Passover, has been sacrificed. Alleluia!

Each year we sing these ancient words, praising the Lord for doing the mightiest of deeds: sacrificing His only-begotten Son as the unblemished Lamb to set us free from sin and death.

Yet, as Easter draws near, our unusual and anxious Lenten journey might not leave us ready to sing “Alleluia!” Never could we have anticipated this Lent would be one of suspended Masses, closed church buildings, and social distancing. Never could we have anticipated this Lent would seem to remove us from physical contact with our faith practices. It is hard to sing “Alleluia” in the midst of all this loss. Yet, this is precisely what our faith draws forth from us.

For, on the darkest of nights, the light of Christ pierces the darkness with a flame of hope that lifts up our sullen spirits and points our hearts to the Risen One. Loss gives birth to gain, death rises to life, and the sealed tomb opens up to let in the bright promise of a brand new day. And, indeed we sing, “Alleluia!”

As Christ’s disciples, we are renewed once more with the knowledge that with the Risen Lord by our side, neither darkness nor despair, not even the devastation of the coronavirus, can overcome us. Christ assures and reassures us time and again that all His suffering, our suffering, will lead to glory. Because of His sacrifice on Good Friday, not even death can defeat us.

This year, our Easter celebrations will most certainly be unusual. Although we cannot gather together in person, Christ will still be with us. He will embrace us and hold us fast during these uncertain times. And, we will be knit together by the power of the Holy Spirit gathering us into the Church across the face of our Diocese.

I am reminded of our Lord’s words in the Gospel of Mark when He says, “Take courage. It is I. Do not be afraid.” With these words our Lord calmed His terrified disciples and then, getting into their storm tossed boat, calmed the storm on the Sea of Galilee. You and I need to remember our Lord’s words and let them keep us from anxiety and fear during our current storm. Jesus is in our boat. Do not be afraid and know the peace of Easter.

Wherever we find ourselves this Easter on our life’s journey, may Christ’s Paschal Mystery be our joy and hope. And may we never stop singing, “Alleluia!” for the mighty things the Father has done and is doing even now for us in Christ Jesus.

Bishop Gainer’s Easter Letter

By Rachel Bryson, M.S.

The Catholic Witness

Using technology to stay connected to the faithful during the unprecedented coronavirus pandemic, Bishop Ronald Gainer will celebrate the Diocese’s first ever digital Holy Week and Easter. The difficult decision to extend Easter was made after careful consideration of the decree (In time of Covid-19 (IlI)) issued by Pope Francis, and in following the recommendations of state and local governments and, most especially, out of continued concern for the health and wellbeing of the faithful.

“Our Diocese, our nation and our world are experiencing the unthinkable with the coronavirus. With this global pandemic in mind, the Holy See, Pope Francis, has decreed that all Holy Week and Easter Masses will be celebrated, but that countries impacted by coronavirus and in cases where restrictions regarding the assembly and movement of people are in place, the bishop and priests may celebrate without the presence of the faithful.

“With the restrictions and recommendations from our state government, and in consideration of the highly contagious nature of this virus, it would be irresponsible of me to open our parishes while still in the midst of this pandemic,” said Bishop Gainer. “Please know the impact of this decision is not lost on me. I too am deeply hurting by not being able to gather with the faithful for the celebration of Mass. Although we cannot come together for public Masses during this holiest time of year, our priests will celebrate Palm Sunday, Holy Week and Easter Masses. Many of our parishes are live streaming these Masses and I encourage the faithful to participate in Mass through these online means.”

The digital Holy Week and Easter Masses will be celebrated with the faithful, who are asked to join remotely. All live streams of Holy Week and Easter Masses will be recorded and available for view after the scheduled Mass. As of press time, the digital Holy Week and Easter celebration includes the following celebrated by Bishop Gainer. Visit www.hbgdiocese.org for streaming information:

- Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord – April 5 at 9:30 a.m.
- Thursday of the Lord’s Supper (Holy Thursday) – April 9 at 5:30 p.m.
- Friday of the Passion of the Lord (Good Friday) – April 10 at noon
- Easter Sunday of the Resurrection of the Lord - April 12 at 9:30 a.m.

Parishioners should be receiving Holy Week and Easter liturgical guides from their parishes, so they may follow along with the Masses from home. The Diocesan website also includes a number of additional resources for the faithful, including information on making a Spiritual Communion and a listing of more than 20 parishes live streaming Masses, the Stations of the Cross and other prayer services and devotions.

In addition, the faithful are encouraged to continue to financially support their parish during these times. The parishes work hard to be financially sound during typical times, but many do not have the deep cash-reserves needed to absorb the economic impacts of the once-in-a-lifetime event of COVID-19. Without your support, your parish will struggle to continue its most basic functions and may be unable to continue its charitable works in your community.

Gifts can be made by mailing your check to your parish office, using your Parish’s online giving system or through using the Diocesan online system at https://www.hbgdiocese.org/parishgive. Please note that all gifts made to parishes using this system will be credited to the parish. Non-parishioners should be receiving Holy Week and Easter liturgical guides from their parishes, so they may follow along with the Masses from home. The Diocesan website also includes a number of additional resources for the faithful, including information on making a Spiritual Communion and a listing of more than 20 parishes live streaming Masses, the Stations of the Cross and other prayer services and devotions.

For additional information on the Diocesan response to the COVID-19 situation and additional resources, please visit www.hbgdiocese.org/coronavirus.

Bishop Gainer to Celebrate Digital Holy Week and Easter with the Faithful
The shadow of a man praying the Stations of the Cross at St. Paul the Apostle Parish in Annville. Annville shows Jesus being Nailed to the Cross.

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said. “We’re continuing to have an active liturgical life, and we’re bringing the people in spiritually and virtually. They are with us.”

‘Doing Church Differently’

In the wake of Church closures and the suspension of public Masses due to the coronavirus pandemic, parishes have stepped up to the challenge of finding new, creative and necessary ways to bring Christ and the Gospel message to their people, and are maintaining and strengthening community in the process.

“We are going through a Good Friday experience right now. But we are a people of hope,” said Father Kevin Coyle, pastor of St. Paul the Apostle Parish in Annville.

“With Good Friday, we know that the Resurrection on Sunday is coming. There is a beauty in that anticipation that is going to strengthen our faith, our spiritual life and our relationship with Jesus Christ. Jesus said on the cross, ‘I Thirst.’ We are experiencing that thirst.”

With an empathetic understanding that people’s experience of Church is different in these days of social distancing, St. Paul’s has taken an approach to reflect the change. That includes a revamped website, “St. Paul’s at Home: A Pastoral Response to a Change in Worship.” The site includes resources for keeping the faith, worshiping as a family, deepening a relationship with Christ, ways to volunteer or to receive assistance, and resources for parish giving.

The parish parking lot is now the place where parishioners can worship, pray and reflect — albeit from within their vehicles. Adoration is available as people sit in their cars before a tabernacle placed on an altar inside the church’s glass doors. St. Paul’s also offers drive-through Stations of the Cross, available at any time. Hand-painted by a parishioner, the images are secured to upright wooden pallets spaced around the perimeter of the parking lot. The Stations are lit at nighttime, allowing visitors to reflect at any time on the final day of Christ’s life on earth.

“We’re doing Church differently right now,” Father Coyle said of the efforts, which include a livestream of Mass on Facebook.

“Mass is not cancelled. Mass is still being celebrated. It might just be the priest at the altar and the pews are empty, but the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is still being offered and Jesus Christ continues to give himself every day through the hands of the priest.”

“The spirituality and devotion of the people here at St. Paul’s is so strong and deep. We have to keep feeding it,” he said.

Lauren Schuyler said she found food for her soul in Eucharistic Adoration at Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish in Cornwall, where the Blessed Sacrament can be seen against the glass doors of the parish center.

“Learning that our parishes had to close their doors was an incredibly sad moment, but knowing that they were still providing parishioners opportunities to spend time with our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament provided such consolation for my soul!” said Shuyler, middle school religion teacher at Lebanon Catholic School.

Shuyler and her mother, Julie, drove to Sacred Heart and prayed the Rosary together before the Blessed Sacrament.

“I had been talking to a friend of mine who also went to adoration that St. Paul’s in Annville was offering, and we were discussing how we both truly felt like we missed Jesus. I had never experienced that before!” Shuyler remarked.

“I have gone back to just say ‘hello’ to our Lord and pray, and it has helped me feel spiritually connected during this time of uncertainty. I would strongly encourage all Catholics to visit Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, as it is a balm for the soul. We may not be able to physically be with one another as a Church community, but we can unite together in prayer and adoration as members of the Mystical Body of Christ,” she said.

Live Feeds Feed Souls

When St. Monica Parish in Sunbury took to Facebook for a first-ever live feed of the celebration of Mass on the Feast of St. Joseph, March 19, the experience went so well that Father Fred Wangwe, AJ, decided to do the same with Sunday Masses. Until he received feedback from parishioners. They wanted more.

“The parishioners were
saying to me, ‘We’re at home, we’re not doing anything, could you offer Mass every day?’ So we decided to start streaming the Mass every day. We’re also doing Stations of the Cross using images in the church, and will be doing Adoration and the Divine Mercy Chaplet on First Friday,” Father Wangwe said.

He said the transition to live feeds was easy to do with Facebook, and that the use of social media is important to keep parishioners connected. But he’s also been reaching out personally to parishioners over the phone.

“I have been calling them personally to check on them. Some will ask me to remember them in my prayers, or we’ll pray together over the phone,” he said. “They are grateful to hear from me and know that we remain in spiritual communion.”

Celebrating Mass in front of empty pews is a stark contrast for priests, Father Wangwe said, but it has given him an opportunity for reflection.

“In the 20 years I’ve been a priest, I’ve never celebrated a Sunday Mass without people,” he said. “As bad as that is, I think about the blessings that God has given to me. I think of the people who in one way or another are sick, and of priests who, for one reason or another, maybe are unable to celebrate Mass. This has made me appreciate more and to be thankful to God that he has kept me healthy and in his graces to be able to celebrate Mass.”

“More than ever, when we experience moments like this, we have an opportunity to reflect much more,” he said. “When we come out of this, we will be much stronger, and the things we took for granted will be so much more appreciated. God will see us through all of this, and we will come out stronger, more united and more faith filled.”

At Holy Spirit Parish in Palmyra, people in parish ministry are lending their talents to bring a variety of offerings through social media, including daily live streams and audio downloads of Mass, the Chaplet of Divine Mercy and praise and worship music.

“It’s giving the opportunity for our own people to minister in a more widespread way, and I’ve seen those charisms. It’s a unique opportunity for the self-identification of our local Church,” said Father Anthony Dill, pastor.

Parishioners involved in music ministry – Holly Serio, Richard Druby and Chris Wood – lend their talents as musicians and vocalists to bring sung prayer to the Mass and Chaplet. They’re also working to post audio from a Sound Cloud page onto a podcasting platform for greater accessibility.

“Right away, they helped us with our infrastructure within the first week. They add so much to the celebration of the Mass. It’s been great to see the parishioners step up and make these things possible for us,” said Father Dill.

“And the parishioners have been so appreciative of it. In fact, Chris joked that the organ concert he did had more hits than my daily Mass on Sound Cloud!” he joked.

Wood, who leads the Chaplet daily, said playing music alone isn’t unusual for a musician, but speaking to an unseen community can be challenging.

“When I started the Chaplet, it was on my mind because I didn’t want to mess up. But it’s starting to get easier to relax,” he said.

“When I’m finished, I give a reflection, and it’s strange because you feel like you’re talking to nobody except the reflection of your face in the screen. But I do see comments and little emojis that float up on the screen, and that’s a great reminder to know that people are watching.”

Parish manager Janet Parks monitors Facebook during the live feeds. “There are a ton of comments from parishioners saying, ‘Thank you, Father Anthony.’ ‘We are so blessed.’ And I also see them posting responses to the Mass, like ‘And with your spirit,’ or ‘Amen.’ They’re commenting on Father’s homilies and posting that...”

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The Stations of the Cross are a 14-step Catholic devotion that commemorates Jesus’ last day on earth as a man. Each Station focuses on specific events of his last day, and calls us to pray and reflect on each event.

The Stations presented here were original to the first church of St. Joseph Parish in Hanover in the late 1870s, painted by Italian artist Lorenzo Scattaglia. In 1977, some 14 years after the original church was razed, St. Joseph Parish donated the paintings to the State Museum of Pennsylvania for preservation. They were presented in a special viewing in conjunction with the parish’s 150th anniversary celebration.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Lord Jesus, we offer our prayers to you today for our world, our country, our state and our local community. As we meditate on your sacred Passion, may we take the pain and needs of all humanity and pray through your suffering for your creation: your people whom you love. In your precious name, we pray. Amen.

I. Jesus is Condemned to Death
We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you, because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.
Lord, you were held captive and given a death sentence. This was truly undeserved but nonetheless it was still carried out - even though you were innocent. There are thousands upon thousands in our world today who have been held captive not knowing what their fate will be: people on cruise ships, hotels, cities, neighborhoods, those moved to military confinement, people confined to their own homes and those in isolation. They also are innocent victims: victims of a disease that cannot be seen, tasted or felt. We also pray for those in jails and prisons, immigration holding areas, and those who work there so that everyone’s health is protected. We pray for them. Allow them to feel your presence. Watch over them. Holy Spirit give them peace. (Glory Be)

II. Jesus Carries His Cross
We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you, because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.
Lord, you were given a cross, a heavy load filled with the pain, death and suffering of all humanity. The separation of our lives from yours through sin must have been a pain almost too heavy to bear. Was the separation, death and sickness the world feels now from this virus, a part of the cross you carried? May we depend on your love and your carrying of the cross to carry us through these times of the unknown. Watch over us. Holy Spirit, show us how to accept the cross of this pandemic and move forward. (Glory Be)

III. Jesus Falls the First Time
We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you, because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world. Lord, you fell under the burden of the cross and the pain of your wounds. The road was not an easy path, and all of that brought you unexpectedly to your knees. This coronavirus was unexpected and has brought our world, our nation, our community to its knees in trying to fight the invisible, the disease that is not always the same from person to person. Country after country is falling...but just as you did not give up, neither does humanity that you created. Watch over us. Holy Spirit, with your help, may the world be given the wisdom to stand strong against this disease. (Glory Be)

IV. Jesus Meets His Mother
We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you, because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world. Lord, your mother loved you and you loved her. Meeting her when you were so fragile and so worn had to be difficult. May all families in our world, in our nation, in our community come together and bond and help each other in this time of trial. May the time we are together in our homes be considered a blessing so that we can get to know each other and care for each other in a more complete and loving way. Watch over us. Holy Spirit, bind us tighter and help us to feel comfortable with each other again. (Glory Be)

V. Simon Helps Carry the Cross
We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you, because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world. Lord, the cross was heavy and you were slowing down. Simon was told to help you. And you humbly accepted his help. We know in this time of pandemic each country is testing and working hard to fight the virus, to heal its citizens and to find a vaccine or medication that will help. We pray for those in the World Health Organization, Centers for Disease Control, our President and all elected officials to make wise decisions to benefit all. May the government leaders and medical teams of all the world’s nations be willing and able to share information with each other so that together, with the guidance of your Holy Spirit, we come to know what works and how to safely handle this cross of illness. Watch over them. Through their service they may bring healing. Holy Spirit, guide them. (Glory Be)
VI. 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.
Lord, when you were mocked and derided, your clothing was torn through your body with every breath you took. Your mother never left you, and a few of your friends stood by and held vigil for you. Even in your pain you reached out to the thief next to you and assured him of your redemption. We look for ways to relieve anxiety and fear in all people, and for ways to protect and send information without panic and anger. We hold in prayer all of our clergy who meet the sick daily and pray and anoint them. Keep them safe. We pray for the medical community that cares for the sick and puts in endless and often thankless hours of vigilance. Keep them safe, and give them wisdom. May each country’s attempt to curb the growth of the virus be lessons for the world community. Watch over us. Holy Spirit, help us to trust and not be filled with fear. (Glory Be)

VII. Jesus Falls a Second Time
We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you, because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.
Lord, weakness again overcomes you and you fall under the weight of a cross that you bore on our behalf. We pray in respect to the weakness of our health care and governmental systems in the ability to fight this unknown entity of coronavirus. We have never experienced something like this and we need your help in combating it. We are stronger when we are unified rather than fighting from within over policies and procedures. Help us to identify our weaknesses and repair them and work together for the good of all humanity. Watch over us. Unite us. Holy Spirit, inspire us to set aside differences, and help us rise to the occasion, to do your work here on earth. (Glory Be)

VIII. Jesus the Meets the Women of Jerusalem
We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you, because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.
Lord, some of your friends were reaching out to you in your greatest time of need. In these challenging times we see instances of family and friends helping one another. We see friends and strangers alike taking it upon themselves to feed children who will not eat due to school closures, by providing lunches for them. We see medical professionals putting themselves on the line every day taking care of the sick, often not knowing if the illness that is being presented is serious or the common cold. We hold in prayer all those in our town who are concerned for their loved ones and do everything they can to protect them. Watch over them. Encourage them. Holy Spirit, give them an understanding of hope. (Glory Be)

IX. Jesus Falls the Third Time
We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you, because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.
Lord, your pain from your head to your feet was burning and overwhelming. It took immense concentration to put one foot in front of the other, and your pain was so intense that you fell again. No one can imagine what you were going through. We have a hard time understanding that we are living in this day and age where a virus is making the world stand still. We pray for those in our world who are trying to take advantage of others by hoarding items or trying to sell needed medical items at outrageous prices. This instills panic and frustration and anger. Watch over us. Change hearts. Holy Spirit, convict their hearts so they stop unfair practices. (Glory Be)

X. 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.
Lord, when you were stripped of your clothing, you were mocked and debased. We have seen instances of those who are being mocked in profiling for this virus. We ask forgiveness for times we have been afraid of someone because of their culture, their ethnicity, their age or their income level. We are all your children and we must treat one another with dignity and care. We pray for those in our world, country and town who are some of the most vulnerable to this virus: those who have underlying health concerns, the aged, and those with disabilities. Watch over them. Build them up. Holy Spirit, open our eyes to any treatment that is unfair and prejudicial, and give us courage to stand up for those in need. (Glory Be)

XI. 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.
Lord, you were nailed to the cross and raised high for all to see and condemn. Your suffering and dying tore through your body with every breath you took. Your mother never left you, and a few of your friends stood by and held vigil for you. Even in your pain you reached out to the thief next to you and assured him of salvation. We also seek assurance in this time. Some may feel afraid of a death of their comfort. Jobs are being affected. Life as we knew it weeks ago has changed all over the world. Help us to find assurance in you. You have promised that we are not alone. May all understand this and recognize your presence. Watch over all of them. Unite them. Holy Spirit, may they see Christ in each other. (Glory Be)

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XII. Jesus Dies on the Cross

We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you, because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world. (Kneel if you are able)

Lord, your death was a pain-filled sacrifice. You died for each one of us. Unselfish, humble, perfect and complete was your surrender. Your death freed us from the pain of eternal separation from you. We pray for those in our world, nation, state and community who have died from or will succumb to the coronavirus. We pray that all the souls of the faithful departed, through your mercy and good ness, be united with you. Holy knowledge of their worth. (Glory Be)

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Father Dill agreed. “People really like being identified with their parish, even though they can’t go into it right now. I feel like even if our broadcast quality wasn’t that high, or even if we offered just one thing a week, people would click on it because they want to be connected to their own parish,” he said.

“It’s hard to know what the long-term effect will be, but I am optimistic because anytime we face something different it’s going to be advantageous for people’s relationship with God, because if you give yourself more opportunity to hear him, you will,” he said.

Father Francis Karwacki, pastor of Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parish in Mount Carmel, said he was devastated by the closure of churches and the suspension of public Masses, though he understood the reason for the protocols.

“Our sacramental ministry as priests to our people is at the very core of our being as priests, and I suddenly felt saddened that I could not share with them the God-given graces they receive through the Mass and Holy Communion, as well as that special experience of the Lord’s mercy they have when in Confession they lay their sins and burdens down at the feet of Jesus and hear the comforting words of peace and forgiveness in the prayer of absolution the priest prays for them,” he said.

The parish has answered the challenge by posting a video of Mass on YouTube, and Father Karwacki posts homilies and reflections to his Facebook page, and the Facebook pages for the parish and its religious education program.

“We members feel deeply this sense of emptiness and loss especially during this special Lenten Season. This desert experience of being deprived of their place of worship with church doors locked can be offered to the Lord as a special sacrifice,” Father Karwacki said.

“We all look forward when we can come together to worship our God in the assembly when our sadness will be turned in to joy,” he said.

XIII. 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.

Lord, your body was removed from the cross and your mother was there to accept your broken and lifeless body. Her grief, sorrow and confusion may have been coupled with fear and anger. Yet she had hope. She knew you and she loved you and was filled with hope. She did not understand what that hope consisted of, but knew that you would not leave those you loved abandoned and alone. As people become sick with this unknown virus, we grieve for those who die. We, too, live in a time of sadness and confusion, a time of fear and anger. We look to your mother, Our Blessed Mother, as a model of hope in the face of the unknown. Watch over us, Mary, our Mother, please pray for us. Holy Spirit, help us to find hope in the darkest of times, because we know we are never abandoned, especially during these times of great need. (Glory Be)

XIV. 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.

Lord, your body was put to rest in a new tomb given to your mother for your burial. This was the moment of complete separation for you and her. We pray for those in our world, nation, state and local community who feel or will feel complete separation because of this virus. We must separate ourselves in social distancing. We separate ourselves from those who are sick. We stay in our homes afraid to move out of our safe zones and are being told to “hunker down.” Separation may be frightening and lonely, but it is also a blessed time for healing. We pray for those who have no place where they may be kept safe and cared for...those who are homeless. We pray for those who reside and work in shelters. And we pray for all those who feel complete separation in this world because of death.

Holy Spirit, please make your presence known to us in a special way when we feel alone. (Glory Be)

XV. The Resurrection

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

Lord, humanity could not imagine the joy and the wonder you were going to give us in your resurrection from the dead. You are a God of the unexpected! We could never even begin to foresee or imagine what you had in store for all people across the world and across all time. Your resurrection is the ultimate hope, the ultimate healing, the ultimate salvation for all. May we turn to you not only in this time of the needs of the present, but also in the joy of the coming future when the cloud before us has been cleared...Help us then to have a better understanding of not only each other but how you guided, loved, healed and journeyed with us in constant companionship, never leaving us and always hearing our prayers and cries. Your resurrection speaks of hope and of what is yet to come. We pray for Pope Francis, all bishops, our clergy, all in ministry, for our parishes and all who walk this journey of the unknown with us. May we unite in the near future to share in the wonder of your glory, shining through it all and bringing us to the other side. Watch over us, Holy Spirit, enliven our faith and help us to not give up. (Glory Be, Our Father) In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.
Tell me about your experience in Catholic school.

I went to Delone Catholic High School, and I loved it there. I graduated there in 2000. The influence of the Catholic Church in school life made that environment much more peaceful. Most of my parishioners have public school kids, so I’m not trying to down public schools. But you go into school every day and there are crucifixes and uniforms, and there is religion class and a couple religious Sisters. I kind of felt bad for some of my classmates who had been in Catholic school their whole life, because they had never experienced public school and didn’t see the difference.

For me, it was very different walking into a Catholic school. There was a healthy discipline and Jesus was ever-present there. Frankly, the students were more kind overall. When I look back now, there were advantages to being in public school, if all you’d ever been in was Catholic school. But there are disadvantages if you never really saw the difference.

Then I went to Franciscan University, which was like Catholic college on steroids. It was like an oasis in the desert. Your faith was there was so awesome. The dynamism of the Catholic faith there was so awesome.

When did you first give serious thought to the priesthood?

My parents took us to church every Sunday and I was an altar server at Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish in Abbottstown. I thought about the priesthood as a little kid, but it was just an idea that I had. Really, it was when I was in seminary that I really discerned the call. It wasn’t until my third year in seminary that I knew for sure that I was called to be a priest.

After college, I looked at it from the standpoint, “Of the options of things in my life, what is the one thing I have to eliminate before I try other things?” I decided it was seminary, so I went, and I ultimately never turned back. I actually had a spiritual experience where I knew I was called to priesthood, and had no more doubts after that.

It happened after my second year in Rome. The first two years of study in Rome, you’re supposed to stay there. Father LaVoie, the Vocations Director at the time, said, “It’s like you just got engaged to someone you haven’t seen for two years.” I was seriously questioning things during those two years because I didn’t see myself as a Vatican bureaucrat or that type of mentality, although there was a lot I loved about being there.

One day, there was a busload of American pilgrims at our seminary, and we were providing hospitality for them. I just had this experience where I was looking at them and I had this peace that came over me that said, “This is my bride. My bride is the Church, especially the American Church that I was born into.” A great peace fell over me, and I had no more doubt. Before that, I had a lot of struggles with discernment and was ready to leave at one point, and considering the mission field because of a trip to Zambia I had taken as a seminarian. But I felt God was calling me to serve here. I see this ministry as more challenging than being a priest in Africa.

In places like Zambia, there is real cultural diversity. In Africa, you go from one town to the next, and there is a different culture, a different language, different ways of eating and dancing. There are all these different languages and customs, and each group has its own identity. In some ways, Europe and America are kind of the same with industrialization. In Africa, people live with the land and it’s a very stress-free environment with little societal expectations. In America, we kind of have a a ceding attitude towards people in Africa, as if they have it worse off. In a sense, yes, but we are blinded by our wealth and our gadgets. We don’t have a simple lifestyle. In Zambia, I never felt stress. That doesn’t mean there aren’t problems there, but everything was calm and relaxed. Flying back to Rome, I could start to feel my nerves tense up.

There are a lot of advantages to the lifestyle in Zambia. I would love to go back and visit for a couple weeks or a year, but I don’t see that as an option. My call is here. It’s not always about what you want.

What did your time in Zambia teach you? Do you share those things with people in your ministry?

The things that we get so upset about here, like the college students will get so upset about classes and grades – and I did too – but at the end of the day, God’s not going to care if you graduated from college or not. That’s not part of our judgment. We have these worldly standards that society sets up, and if you go to another culture, none of those standards exist. Our standards here are more artificial than those in Zambia. The strong family ties, respectfulness, humility and looking out for each other are the standards that we can learn from that culture. The lies our culture is pedaling on our young people wouldn’t be thinkable in Zambia.

St. Luke’s Beatitudes say “Blessed are the poor, for the Kingdom of God is theirs.” A lot of people don’t talk about that Beatitude. He’s not saying, “Blessed are the poor because those who have more are going to give them more.” He’s saying, “It is a blessing to be poor.”

We have pornography and rampant divorce, nobody can make a commitment anymore, and I see those things in campus ministry, where it’s hard for young people to even make a commitment. There is so much work to be done here.

Do you have a favorite aspect of your ministry?

That’s something that changes from year to year. When I was at St. Patrick’s in Carlisle, I was assigned to prison ministry. I was scared about it at first, but it actually became the easiest form of ministry. There’s always expectations that are overturned.

I like preaching a lot. I struggled the first few years to get into a groove, but I’m becoming so comfortable with the Scriptures presented to us in the Lectionary that I enjoy meditating on them. It seems like God is consistent in giving me insights to work with. The Holy Spirit is pretty consistent. If I’m open to hearing what he wants to share, I’m usually getting something. If I’m not getting anything, it might be because I’m not really opening my heart up to it.

I’m praying and meditating over the readings the whole week, after starting on Sunday night. I’ll read it three or four times, look at context, look at footnotes. And then I’ll let it sit. I start thinking about what I want to say, different experiences come up, and things start to solidify. The 5:00 Saturday Mass crowd usually gets the worst of my homilies because it’s the trial run. It’s not exactly the same for all three Masses because I’m not using a text, but I type homilies after Mass so I remember what I said and perhaps reuse some or build on them.

You have a parish and campus ministry. Talk about those dynamics.

It’s a big college and a small parish. It’s challenging because running a parish and being a campus minister are two very different ways of being a priest. There are a lot of professors who are parishioners. The parish is very devoted to the university and its campus ministry because we’re so close to it. I also have a lay campus minister, Nichole Schneider, who connects with the students very well and she’s full-time. The advantage of having someone skilled like her is that I can just show up and focus on relationships with students so that their faith grows. I have to divide my time between the parish and the campus, and it works out because Nicole is there.

The students bring a vitality to the whole experience here. This
Encountering Passiontide and Waiting for Something Greater

By Father Joshua R. Brommer

Special to The Witness

The Fifth Sunday of Lent thrust ed us into the period of Passion tide. It is a time that draws us more deeply into the Passion of Jesus. Things become sparser in the Liturgy of the Church and our lives are supposed to reflect that sparsity as well. Usually, the statues in the Cathedral are covered with purple veils as a further reminder of the intensity of this period of Lent. This year, I’ve decided that the purple veil has cloaked the world and there is no need to cover the statues that you catch a glimpse of during the televised Masses. The coronavirus pandemic has shrouded enough this year. And, there are certainly plenty of opportunities to experience the spar ity if we allow it.

It is on this Sunday that we encounter Martha and Mary, mourning for their brother Lazarus. Jesus had a unique relationship with these siblings: they were close friends. Yet, when the sisters shipped with these siblings: they were mourning for their brother Lazarus, when He did not re close friends. Yet, when the sisters needed Jesus most, He did not re close friends. Yet, when the sisters shipped with these siblings: they were mourning for their brother Lazarus, when He did not re close friends. Yet, when the sisters

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It is on this Sunday that we encounter Martha and Mary, mourning for their brother Lazarus. Jesus had a unique relationship with these siblings: they were close friends. Yet, when the sisters needed Jesus most, He did not respond immediately. When Lazarus lay dying, Jesus did not come to heal his illness. To most of us, this likely seems unfair and cruel. Why didn’t Jesus prevent the great suffering of Martha and Mary? Why didn’t He respond immediately to their cry for help?

St. Peter Chrysologus teaches that this was because Jesus saved something greater for His friends: “For Christ it was more important to conquer death than to cure disease. He showed his love for his friend not by healing him but by calling him back from the grave. Instead of a remedy for his illness, he offered him the glory of rising from the dead.”

It is hard sometimes for us to accept that God allows an evil to happen, like sickness and death, in order to bring about a greater good. From our limited perspectives we can only see what fits within our own worlds. It is difficult for us to grasp heaven and eternal life, to see the big picture that God alone can see. For God, our earthly existence is but a prelude to eternity. And, Jesus wants us to embrace this truth as well. He wants us to reprioritize to have our hearts set on something greater.

I cannot see clearly what greater good God is going to bring about because of the suffering and death that plagues the face of the earth today. Perhaps we shall see in the weeks and months ahead. Or, perhaps we shall never see on this side of heaven. But, I wonder if the Gospel today doesn’t point to something of this expectation, especially as we experience the limitations, fears, and strangeness of these days. Maybe St. Peter Chrysologus points it out when he says, “It was necessary that Lazarus should die, so that the faith of the disciples might also rise with him from the dead.” Maybe this time is meant to help us grow in our faith, to wake us up to see that there is something greater than how we have been living up till now?

Faith has so many dimensions that are being drawn out by our current trial. If this is meant to help us grow in faith, then maybe we can examine ourselves. Do I treasure the goodness and provid ing love of God? Do I value earthly life more than heaven? Do I fear suffering without understanding it can be redemptive? Have I taken the giftedness of my life for granted? Have I been present to my family and friends? Have I taken my religious practice for granted?

Am I more concerned with having my own way than finding God’s will in the present moment? I can confess to you that this time has helped to deepen my own love for the gift of my priesthood, my role as pastor to a wonderful parish family, my place as one who administers the sacraments that help to heal and strengthen us on life’s journey. I miss greeting everyone at the end of Mass and worshiping as a family of faith. It has also checked some bad habits that have crept into my prayer life and way of relating with the Lord, creating in me a deeper hunger for prayer and living the spiritual life. In just a few days, the Lord opened my eyes to see that I need to give Him more of myself!

My sincere hope for you and for me is that we do not waste our time of trial but allow it to sow seeds of new life in our lives that blossom once the stone is rolled away from the tomb.

(Father Brommer is the pastor and rector of the Cathedral Parish of St. Patrick in Harrisburg. His reflection was initially published in the March 29 bulletin and is reprinted here with permission.)

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The
CrossWord
Puzzle is found on 10
Battling a Pandemic of Grief

By Sister Geralyn Schmidt, SCC
Special to The Witness

Some time ago, when my last parent was called home to heaven, I found myself grieving not only the loss of my mom but also the loss of what “normal” had become. You see, when a Sister goes on “vacation,” it usually means visiting family. “Home” in the “nun world” usually means the place of refreshment where you can catch up on some much needed rest. Because of my mom’s death, homelessness bit into my grief horribly. I felt lost, unattached to anyone. Loneliness wreaked havoc on my heart.

I tell you this not only because we are in the midst of a pandemic, but also because of one of its side effects: grief. With terms like social distancing, hot zones, lockdowns, quarantines and isolations, we have all been bitten by this horrid heartache. You might be thinking, “But grief?”

Ponder this: Think of something you care about, an individual you love, or an activity that defines who you are. Has anything associated with that changed since this journey began? Do you find yourself thinking, “How long is this going to continue?” Is there an end in sight? What if ….?” If any of these questions have crossed your mind, then you are grieving. Maybe you find yourself crying without knowing the reason, or you’re angry all time.

Very recently, I received an article that describes it this way: As human beings, whenever our attachments are threatened, harmed, or severed, we naturally grieve. Grief is everything we think and feel inside of us when this happens.1

We are being barraged with procedures and processes on how to stay healthy physically. But we are not just a body or a bundle of feelings. We have a soul as well. Our soul often cries out at moments like this. What should you do? For the health of our bodies, we can wash our hands. But for our souls?

Reach out by phone, e-mail, Skype, Face-Time, etc., to the ones you love. Express how you feel to this friend or family member, no matter what it may be.

As I was writing this article, I received a phone call from our florist. Since they are closed with no re-opening date, our convent’s order for flowers for Easter was cancelled. When I shared that with another Sister, she said, “We have more than enough silk flowers! Nothing will match but it will be beautiful! A true Garden for Christ!” She was so right.

Make a point to take some quiet time to talk to Jesus and/or Mary about what is on your heart. You might want to view Mass online. You might want to say a Rosary. There are plenty of streams on parish websites and Facebook pages, as well as videos on YouTube.

Not long ago, a gentleman called my office at the Diocesan Center and challenged me to write about the Liturgy of the Hours. I said to him, “Ok, when the time is right!” Well, now is the time! At a very high level, the Liturgy of the Hours are a series of Psalm readings, readings from Scripture and prayers that are either recited or chanted. Each “hour” calls the faithful to stop and look toward heaven. There are many free apps for the Liturgy of the Hours that you can download if you have a smartphone. I personally like The Divine Office app. Besides giving you the text, you can download the audio file as well. In addition, it indicates how many people are using the app throughout the world, with a globe full of tiny white dots. Each dot is my Brother or Sister in Christ. We present a global community praying to a Creator, who truly does hear our prayers!

Please take care of your physical needs. Be prudent with your contacts! But above all, our world is undergoing a moment of retreat. Make this time holy and spend it not only with the ones you love (albeit at least six feet apart) but also with the One who loves YOU!2

1https://www.centerforloss.com/2020/03/pandemic-of-grief/

(Sister Geralyn Schmidt is the Wide Area Network Coordinator at the Diocese of Harrisburg and the Director of Formation for Wives in the Diaconate Program. An educator for 30 years, she is responsible for Professional Development Programs for every age learner. Through her presentations, she challenges her audiences to be the individual God has called them to be.)

Stay Up to Date with Diocesan News Regarding COVID-19

Please visit the Health Alerts page of the Diocesan website, www.hbgdiocese.org, for the most up-to-date information regarding the Diocese’s response to COVID-19. The page provides prayer resources, a listing of parishes offering livestreams of Masses, and coronavirus prevention measures and recommendations.

We also encourage you to stay connected to the Diocese via its social media accounts:

Facebook: www.facebook.com/DioceseofHarrisburg
YouTube: www.youtube.com/user/hbgdiocese
Twitter: www.twitter.com/HBGDiocese
Instagram: www.instagram.com/hbgdiocese/

The Crossword

April 5 and 12, 2020

“Key on page 9”


ACROSS

1 Swiss-like cheese (5) 5 Kimono sash (6)
2 Extremity (10) 11 Light purple flower (8)
3 They both ___ to the tomb (8) 13 "They both ___ to the tomb (8)
4 Card game (4) 14 Newly baked (6)
5 Insect (4) 15 However (7)
6 Attack (5) 16 Loose up (4)
7 At his, all knees shall bend (8) 17 Cab (4)

DOWN

1 First letter of "Arabic alphabet" (2) 2 "_ of Nazareth" (6)
3 Next Vatican Council (8) 4 Drink (5)
5 Gone by (5) 6 Biblical food (6)
7 Type of tea (4) 8 "Did not deem equality something to be ___" (2)
9 A fit (3) 10 Farm credit administration (8)
11 "Used to anoint ___" (5) 12 "my mother" (10)

13 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50

48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72 73 74 75

1 Survivor (10) 2 God is a divine ___ (5) 3 Ascot (4) 4 Jazz musician (10) 5 American College of Physicians (abbr.) (9)
6 "To the right!" (10) 7 Abnormal (8) 8 Not max (9) 9 OT Prophet (5) 10 Make a letter (9)
11 St., mother of Constantine (10) 12 Crusader stronghold (5) 13 Froth (5) 14 A border reflex (5) 15 Kitten’s cry (6) 16 Before (prefix) (5) 17 Shishkebab (5) 18 Doctoral degree (3)
OBITUARIES

The names of the following deceased persons have been submitted by their parishes. Please remember in your prayers the happy repose of these recently departed souls and the consolation of their loved ones.

Benton
Christ the King: Loretta Leo

Camp Hill
Good Shepherd: Dolores Skowronski

Coal Township
Our Lady of Hope: Eugene Pupiloski

Danville
St. Joseph: Dolores Wetzel

Gettysburg
St. Francis Xavier: Glenn E. Miller

Hanover
St. Vincent de Paul: Charles Alejandre
Steven Baker
Glady's Myers

Harristown
Cathedral Parish of St. Patrick: Charles Puguese

St. Catherine Labouré: Jacob Bobitz, Sr.

St. Francis of Assisi: Margaret Mary Dowling

St. Margaret Mary: William Lyons
Michael A. Mazzacaro

Lancaster
Assumption BVM: Ann McLaughlin

Littlestown
St. Aloysius: Santa Hickey
Patricia Sueck

McSherrystown
Annunciation BVM: Rosetta Sagle

Mechanicsburg
St. Elizabeth Ann Seton: Marie Puckalsky

St. Joseph: Louis Marchi
Viktor Trason

Mount Carmel
Our Lady of Mount Carmel: John Kealy
Jean Sebastian

New Cumberland
St. Theresa: Raymond Gavlick
Robert Torres

New Freedom
St. John the Baptist: William Bevans
Harper Marie Miles
Joan Shultz
Chris Shirley

Steeltown
Prince of Peace: Louise L. Conjar

Trevorton
St. Patrick: Helen B. Betzko
Stella Bronokoski

York
Immaculate Conception BVM: Julia Ramos
Matias Hernandez Saravia

St. Joseph: Joseph Barron, III
Thomas McMaster
Frances “Chi Chi” Trout

St. Rose of Lima: Regina Bennett
Richard Chismer
William Wisman, Jr.

DIOCESAN NOTEBOOK

EDUCATION & ENRICHMENT

“Recognizing Evil in Today’s World,” presented by Father John A. Szada, Official Exorcist for the Diocese of Harrisburg, April 25 at 10:00 a.m. in the former Holy Name of Jesus Church in Harrisburg. Welcomed by “New Age Counterfeit” study class/Johnnette Benkovic Williams, author. Contact Chris Arnold at 717-379-6041 or camold@womenofgrace.com.

PILGRIMAGES & RETREATS

The Sisters of Saints Cyril and Methodius want to provide a healthy and safe environment for all the guests and retreatants at St. Cyril Spiritual Center in Danville as well as to be in compliance with the latest national and CDC guidelines. Therefore, they have cancelled all retreats during March, April and May, along with hosted groups.

FUNDRAISERS & EVENTS

The Annunciation Women of Mercy and Joy in McSherrystown have a visitation group that visits homebound parishioners and gives them a prayer blanket. During this time of social distancing, the group is instead sending cards. If you have someone you’d like to have a card sent to, contact Toni Weaver at sweetbaboo2410@gmail.com.

Morning Star Pregnancy Services is seeking male and female advocates to counsel men and women at risk for abortion or having an STD. Volunteers needed at all three Morning Star locations (Harrisburg, Middletown and New Cumberland). Contact Diane at ddevan@morningstarclinics.com or 717-901-2799 for more information.

Holy Family Radio, Spring Benefit Dinner, which had been scheduled for April 24, has been postponed. A new date will be announced at a later time.

Harrisburg Diocesan Council of Catholic Women seeks applicants for scholarship. Awarding a $1,000 scholarship to a Catholic high school senior girl for the freshman year 2020-2021 at an accredited college, university or trade school. Applicants must be sponsored by a mother, grandmother or guardian who is a member of a Parish Council of Catholic Women. Applicant and sponsor must be residents of the Diocese of Harrisburg. Applications are available from Parish Council of Catholic Women presidents, or by contacting Joyce Scott, scholarship chair, 717-737-0927 or joynebob10@wool.com. Application deadline is May 1.

The 13th Annual St. Margaret Mary 5k in Harrisburg has been postponed to May 30 at 8:30 a.m. More information can be found at www.stmm5k.webs.com.

Twelve-day Greek Odyssey Mediterranean Cruise with Father James O’Blaney, CSSR, pastor of St. Patrick Parish in Lititz, Aug. 26-Sept. 7, 2020. Cruise the Greek islands, visit Santorini, a Crete taverna, Olympia, and the Church of Our Lady of the Castle on Rhodes. For information, contact Feri Armstrong at armstrong@hbgdiocese.org or 717-626-5580.

St. Joseph Leisure Club, Mechanicenburg, “A Tour of Biblical Proportions,” June 23-26 to popular Kentucky destinations, including the Creation Museum, the Ark Encounter, Mainstrasse Village, the Carroll Chimes Bell Tower, Goose Girl Fountain, shops, galleries, dinner cruise on the Queen City Riverboat and a live performance at the Washington Platform Restaurant in Cincinnati. For more information, contact trip coordinators at 717-737-8600.

St. Cecilia Parish in Lebanon, spring travel trip to Foxwood, Mystic and the Newport Mansions. Five days, four nights, May 3-7. Includes motorcoach transportation, four nights lodging at two Tree’s Inn Foxwoods, eight meals. Visit Newport Mansions, Mystic seaport and old Mystic village, for $540 PP double occupancy. Contact Fred Maurer at 717-273-7930.

Resurrection Catholic School in Lancaster, seeking a math/science teacher, Grade 6 homeroom. All applicants must complete the Harrisburg Diocese Professional Employment Application, submit three current letters of reference, and obtain the proper clearances. To be considered for an interview, applicants must also provide a pastor’s letter of recommendation. Submit a cover letter, résumé, aforementioned letters and transcripts to Mr. Jefrey Hughes, principal, at jhughes@rcspa.org or to Resurrection Catholic School, 521 E. Orange Street, Lancaster, PA 17602. Complete and submit the Professional Teaching Application at https://www.hbgdiocese.org/catholic-schools/employment-applications/.

JOB OPENINGS

Deceased Clergy

Please pray for the following clergy who died in April during the past 25 years:

Msgr. Donald Adams, 1996
Father Patrick D’Alessandro, 1996
Deacon Arthur Colonell, 1996
Father Anthony Burakowski, 2002
Father Curtis Delarm, 2005
Father Mark Matthew Casey, OMI, 2007
Father Gerald Lytle, 2012
Deacon Charles Clark, 2012
Father Daniel Mennti, 2015
Deacon Thomas Flannery, 2018

Beginning Experience May Weekend Canceled

The Harrisburg Beginning Experience team is cancelling the weekend planned for May 1-3 at the Jesuit Retreat Center in Wernersville, Pa., due to the current situation with the COVID-19 virus.

The next weekend will be held November 6-8, 2020, at Camp Hebron in Halifax, Pa. The program helps people suffering the loss of a spouse through death, divorce or separation. For information contact Julie at jjennat_50@comcast.net or Eva at toothmom2004@hotmail.com.

Mark Your Calendars!

Next Deadline: April 8

The deadline for submissions for the April 37 edition of The Witness is Wednesday, April 8 at 4:30 p.m. Submit written announcements via e-mail to witness@hbgdiocese.org. Limit 70 words. No ads, posters or P’Fs, please. A link to the submission deadlines for all editions in 2020 is posted on The Witness’ page at www.hbgdiocese.org.

Correction

The caption for the photo of the Geography Bee winners in the March 20 edition incorrectly noted the second and third place finishers. Second place went to Luke Gersten of York Catholic, and third place went to John Boylan of St. Joseph School in Mechanicsburg.
The Cross is Our Hope: Pope Gives Urbi et Orbi Blessing during Coronavirus

By Hannah Brockhaus
Catholic News Agency

On March 27, before an empty and rain-covered St. Peter’s Square, Pope Francis held Eucharistic Adoration and gave an extraordinary Urbi et Orbi blessing, praying for the world during the coronavirus pandemic which had killed more than 30,000 people at press time Tuesday.

The holy hour included a reading from the Gospel and a meditation by Pope Francis, who spoke about faith and trust in God during a time when people fear for their lives, as did the disciples when their boat was caught in a violent storm.

“We have an anchor: by his cross we have been saved. We have a rudder: by his cross we have been redeemed. We have a hope: by his cross we have been healed and embraced so that nothing and no one can separate us from his redeeming love,” Pope Francis said.

Embracing Christ’s cross, he said, “means finding the courage to embrace all the hardships of the present time.”

“Embracing the Lord in order to embrace hope: that is the strength of faith, which frees us from fear and gives us hope,” the pope stated.

Pope Francis held Eucharistic Adoration on an altar set up under the portico in front of St. Peter’s Basilica. Also present nearby was a miraculous crucifix which the pope visited March 15 to pray for an end to the coronavirus pandemic.

The crucifix, which usually hangs in San Marcello al Corso, was venerated as miraculous by Romans after it was the only religious image to survive unscathed from a fire that completely gutted the church on May 23, 1519.

An image of the Byzantine icon of Mary as Salus Populi Romani, was also brought to the square for veneration during the prayer.

At the conclusion of the prayer, Pope Francis gave an extraordinary Urbi et Orbi blessing, and gave benediction with the Blessed Sacrament while the bells of the basilica rang.

In his meditation, Pope Francis entrusted everyone to the Lord through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, “from this colonnade that embraces Rome and the whole world.”

“Lord, may you bless the world, give health to our bodies and comfort our hearts,” he prayed. “You ask us not to be afraid. Yet our faith is weak and we are fearful. But you, Lord, will not leave us at the mercy of the storm.”

“Tell us again: ‘Do not be afraid’ (Mt 28:5). And we, together with Peter, ‘cast all our anxieties onto you, for you care about us.’”

God’s call to be converted resounds in our hearts this Lent, he said. This is a time, he said, “to separate what is necessary from what is not. It is a time to get our lives back on track with regard to you, Lord, and to others.”

In this moment, “how many are praying, offering and interceding for the good of all. Prayer and quiet service: these are our victorious weapons,” Pope Francis said.

He noted that in the Gospel, the disciples are afraid of the storm, but Christ sleeps in the boat. The disciples lacked faith not because they stopped believing in Christ, but because they think he does not care about what happens to them.

“Do you not care about me?” It is a phrase that wounds and unleashes storms in our hearts. It would have shaken Jesus too. Because he, more than anyone, cares about us. Indeed, once they have called on him, he saves his disciples from their discouragement,” Pope Francis said.

The storm, he said, “exposes our vulnerability and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities.”

“Why are you afraid?” Have you no faith? Lord, your word this evening strikes us and regards us, all of us.”

The extraordinary Urbi et Orbi also included the opportunity for Catholics to receive a plenary indulgence by joining via the media, praying for the intentions of the pope, and having perfect contrition, as well as the will to receive sacramental confession and the Eucharist as soon as possible.

Pope Francis said during the hour of prayer that part of faith is realizing we are in need of salvation, that we are not self-sufficient. “We need the Lord, like ancient navigators needed the stars,” he said. “Let us invite Jesus into the boats of our lives. Let us hand over our fears to him so that he can conquer them. Like the disciples, we will experience that with him on board there will be no shipwreck.”