

Hello Our Lady of Lourdes Parish,

You have been on my mind and in my prayers a lot recently in this difficult time. It seems like every day brings a new announcement about things being closed down or expected reopening dates being pushed back. As you may be aware, I have been studying in Italy for the past year and a half. It is very surreal to see the same measures that Italy has taken being taken a few days later back home. I hope and pray that things do not escalate to the levels that they have here in Italy. On Tuesday, March 10 my seminary here in Rome gave us permission to return home. After much discussion, thought, and prayer, I ultimately decided to remain here in Italy. This might seem odd given everything that is happening over here, but here in the seminary we are well provided for physically and spiritually. Although we may not be able to leave the campus, we have a large enough campus that we can still get outside for some fresh air. In addition, as is happening in many other schools, we have switched to a distance learning model and it is much easier to maintain a studious schedule in seminary than in some other place. Finally, here in the seminary we still have access to the sacraments, please be reassured that you are lifted up in prayer at our daily Mass. At the end of the day, I am still a seminarian being formed to become a priest and right now the place to do that is in a seminary, where formation will continue. At this point it still seems likely that I will be able to return home this summer and see you all in person. Please keep me in your prayers and be assured of my prayers for all of you.

Finally, I would like to offer a brief reflection on suffering and the current situation we find ourselves confronting. Suffering is something we naturally shy away from and well we should. It is no fun to be restrained from doing the things we find fulfilling by something that is completely outside of our control. The thought of lying in my bed wracked by pain unable to go about my business is enough to make me recoil in disgust. It is enough to make me want to do everything in my power to avoid that fate and to avoid inflicting it on others.

However, the saints teach us another way too react. They teach us to embrace suffering. St. Theresa of Avila, the great 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish mystic famous for reforming the Carmelite order who suffered from painful diseases for nearly her entire adult life, thought of the diseases that caused her such suffering as a gift from God. In fact, she actually prayed that God would give her diseases so that she could serve Him. How can this be? What did St. Theresa know that made her so willing to suffer? She knew that suffering is a participation in the life of Christ. She knew that rather than being a restriction from doing things, that suffering freed her to focus on the one thing that matters, Jesus Christ. Now, this is not to say that we should recklessly expose ourselves to the Coronavirus in the hopes of heroically suffering as St. Theresa did. Prudence is still a virtue and we are not all called to be holy in the exact same manner as St. Theresa of Avila, but to be holy according to our own gifts. Instead, I would like to focus on a different kind of suffering, spiritual suffering.

Suffering can be spiritual as well as physical. One example of spiritual suffering that comes to mind is being unable to go to Mass and receive our Lord in the Eucharist. This can be especially painful when we look at the saints and see some of the many hardships they endured to go to Mass, some were imprisoned, some were beaten, some were even killed, or we hear about the heroism of Catholics who continue to attend underground Masses despite an oppressive government. I would like to offer another saint for inspiration during this time, St. John of the Cross. St. John of the Cross is famous for his spiritual poems and for helping St. Theresa of Avila with her reform of the Carmelite order. However, there is one particular episode of his life that I would like to focus on during this time. St. John of the Cross was once kidnapped in the middle of the night by some of his brother Carmelites who did not like what he was doing. They imprisoned him for nine months and preventing him from praying, including celebrating the Mass. Imagine, nine months without the Mass and yet St. John of the Cross is one of the great doctors of the Church. In fact, he wrote one of his most famous

poems, *The Spiritual Canticle*, while in prison; his relationship with God only grew stronger while he was imprisoned and cut off from all his normal means of prayer.

Much as physical suffering can free us from any number of things that distract us from Jesus, St. John of the Cross also realized while he was imprisoned that many of the things that we think help lead us to God, actually only distract us. He gives the example of focusing on how well made a rosary is, rather than truly praying or thinking that only by doing *this* particular devotion can I reach God, rather than truly praying. We can sometimes be distracted by these or similar thoughts even when it comes to the Mass, rather than truly praying. This is what St. John of the Cross realized while he was imprisoned, that what truly matters is actually praying to God. This is not to say that devotions, the rosary, or the Mass are unimportant, quite the opposite in fact, they are very important and extremely helpful. No doubt St. John of the Cross celebrated his first Mass after his imprisonment with a particular joy and excitement, a joy that you will no doubt experience when you are able to go to Mass again. Indeed, this crisis should only increase our longing to go to Mass. Rather it is important to allow us to be mindful of where our thoughts are while praying and to constantly be mindful of the presence of God. As St. Theresa of Avila tells us “prayer is nothing else than speaking as friends, being often only with Him who we know loves us”. Even while praying the rosary or at Mass, we should be conversing with God, who loves us and is our friend. So I would invite you to see this time as an invitation to deeper prayer under the guidance of St. Theresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross.

St. Theresa of Avila, pray for us.

St. John of the Cross, pray for us.