

Fear No Evil In the Valley Of Death

Fr Conor McDonough O.P.

When was the last time anxiety was so dominant globally as it is during this epidemic? The Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, perhaps? And before that, the Second World War? Everybody is worried: about their own health, the health of older relatives, their jobs, their businesses, the cancellation of important events, the safety of medical staff, the wellbeing of the most vulnerable.

To this long list of anxieties Catholics can add another: anxiety over separation from the sacraments. In order to halt the spread of the virus, the Catholic hierarchy, in a spirit of good citizenship (see 1 Pet 2:13-17), has followed the directives of public health officials, and in most dioceses gone slightly further by actually suspending public participation in the Mass, and curtailing greatly the availability of the sacrament of reconciliation.

The Absence of the Sacraments

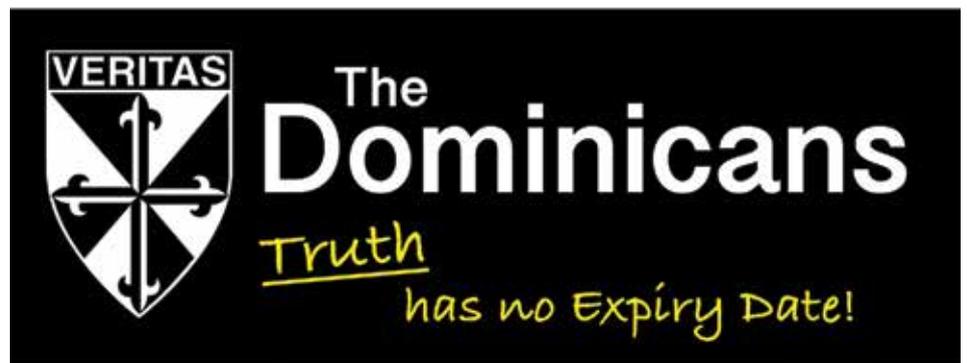
Some have used this as an occasion to quibble or complain, but most are simply suffering this great spiritual loss in silence. And it is a loss. God willed to save and sanctify us through the sacraments, to bear spiritual fruit in our lives by means of these physical realities because we humans are by nature both physical and spiritual. When we're deprived of the sacraments, we're deprived of the physical, tangible, visible assurance of God's saving grace, and this comes precisely at a time when we feel most in need of that assurance.

The current crisis also prevents us from physically gathering together, and this too is a great loss. Think of how Our Lord gathered groups around him, calling them away

from their daily occupations to spend time in his presence: 'Come away with me to a lonely place, and rest a while' (Mk 6:31). After his Ascension the followers of Jesus continued to gather (see Acts 2:44-47), remembering that he promised to be with them always (Mt 28:20), especially when they gathered in his name (Mt 18:20). Since then, Christians have continued to assemble, above

all for the Eucharist, even at times of persecution, and especially during times of suffering. Again, the gathering of his people is a work of God that fits our physical and spiritual nature. This is the fundamental reason it's so painful for Catholics not to be able to attend Mass at this difficult time.

But there's a false conclusion that I've heard some people



"Opinion is a flitting thing,
but Truth outlasts the sun."

- Emily Dickinson

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reaching: that the people of God are necessarily deprived of grace because they cannot receive the sacraments. This is not true, and it's important to understand why.

The Abundant Grace of God

Think about what the sacraments are for. They're not just rites of passage or comforting rituals. They do something. Baptism frees you from sin and makes you a member of the Body of Christ. Communion strengthens and deepens this loving union with Christ, so that more and more we live, not on our own, but 'in Christ', together with all the members of his Body. And, if we remove ourselves from this union by our sins, the sacrament of Reconciliation restores us to the freedom and joy of being a living member of the Body.

The early Church realised, however, that some people, even before they were able to be baptised, lived lives that showed them to be true Christians, truly one with Christ. Think of those martyred before they were baptised, for example. The Fathers of the Church began to speak of a 'Baptism of blood', or a 'Baptism by desire'. The very desire to be united with Christ in

Baptism was understood to bring about in these people the effects normally brought about by actual reception of Baptism.

Later theologians and authoritative teachers explained that the same could be true for the Eucharist and Confession.

'Spiritual Communion'

What is the Eucharist for? Christ's parting gift to the Church was the sacrament of the Eucharist, in which he is substantially present to us, Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity, under the appearance of bread and wine. But the aim of this gift is that our whole life should be a life of spiritual communion with Christ. When we're living the life of grace, all our good deeds, all our prayers, all our acts of faith, hope, and love, are 'spiritual communions' with the Body of Christ.

This fact has led Christians, when deprived of the Eucharist, or when unable to receive at Mass for whatever reason, to focus their desire for the Presence of Christ in a particularly intense way. There are prayers, usually with the title, 'Act of Spiritual Communion', which help people to do just this. The most obvious time to make a spiritual communion is when we're watching the Mass on TV or online, or listening to it on the radio, since the readings and prayers of the Mass are all geared towards communion. But we shouldn't forget that every moment of the Christian life ought to be lived in union with Jesus. The same Jesus we receive in communion is present to us, although in a different mode, whenever we open the door of our hearts to welcome him.

Act of Perfect Contrition

Likewise with confession. True reconciliation with God after serious sin – the normal effect of

the sacrament of Reconciliation – is possible also even when the sacrament cannot be celebrated. If I'm aware of serious sins, but I can't go to confession, I should simply take some time to examine my conscience fully, maybe read a passage of Scripture about God's mercy (Psalm 136 is a great one: 'his mercy endures forever'), and make a good act of contrition (made 'perfect' by the motive of filial love of God, rather than servile fear of punishment). If we do this while intending to go to confession at the next available opportunity, the Church teaches that we are, at that moment, fully reconciled to God, and need not feel burdened by any of our sins.

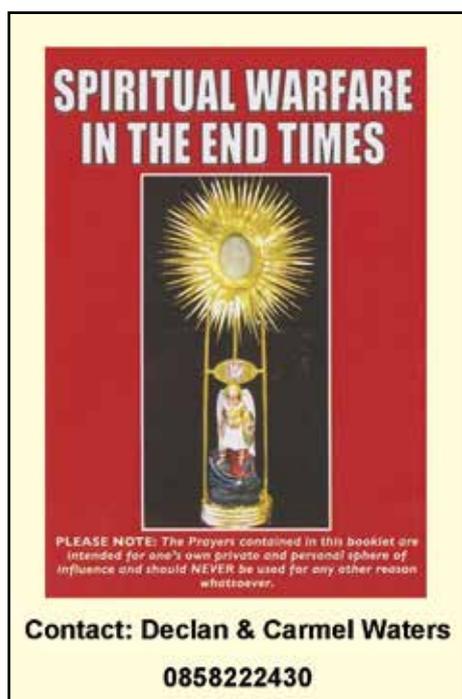
In summary, the giving of grace is God's business, and while he delights in giving grace unfailingly through the sacraments, he delights also in giving grace apart from their actual reception. It is possible to receive the grace of Baptism, or of Communion, or of Reconciliation in advance of the actual reception of the sacrament. Not being able to receive the sacraments does not amount to being cut off from God.

Prayer

In fact, although we cannot gather and celebrate the sacraments, this time is a wonderful opportunity for us to grow in prayer, and to follow Jesus in a more intensely personal way. Some of us are overwhelmed by our work, but those of us who have increased free time should make the most of it by spending good chunks of time in meditation and in the reading of Scripture. It's there that we will meet Christ, and, if we let him, he will show to us new aspects of his beauty, precisely the beauty we need to get us through these strange and challenging times.

Works of Charity

Apart from prayer, of course,



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there's work! God's grace may not be visibly presented to us, in the sacraments, but his invisible grace nevertheless becomes visible when, filled with his divine life, we go on to perform visible, concrete works of charity. There is no shortage of opportunities: phone calls to the lonely; sending a text message to a stressed out friend; posting inspiring messages on social media; shopping trips for the elderly; dog walking; even organising a game of bingo, as they did in the Irishtown flats! The possibilities are endless, and if we are truly children of the God who is love, we'll find ways to contribute. A quick read of Matthew 28 will stir us to action if we're feeling lazy!

Christian Hope

Whatever good works we decide to carry out at this time, we'll be co-operating with people of

goodwill, our friends and family members who do not necessarily share our Christian faith. But there is something in our faith which marks us out from other people of goodwill, something unique which seasons all our words and actions: we know that death and disease been defeated. We read the same news reports as everyone else, but we don't allow ourselves to be fascinated by the statistics of death. We're not materialists: they think that, ultimately, death and decay will be victorious. Because we know the Lord Jesus, we know that's not true. 'O death, where is your sting? O grave, where is your victory?' (1 Cor 15:55).

This means that, even when there is much cause for grief and fear, we continue to sing God's praises. It's not that we're insensitive to the suffering around us. We weep

with those who weep, just as Our Lord Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus, but we know that tears are temporary because God is faithful and Christ is risen. 'At night there are tears, but joy comes with dawn' (Ps 30:5).

Even as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we are not afraid, because we know someone else walked there before us, someone whose every footstep shook that valley's foundations, trampling on disease, defeating death, and opening up for us the way to life eternal.

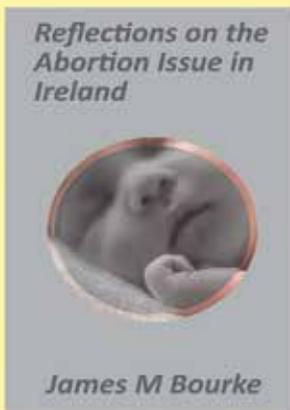
It's up to us, then, to keep our eyes on the risen Christ, to know his victory, and above all at this time of despair and anxiety, to manifest to the world and to each other, in our prayer, words, and deeds, our invincible hope.

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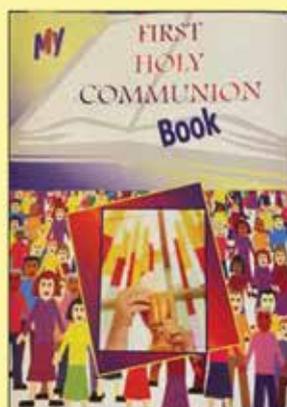
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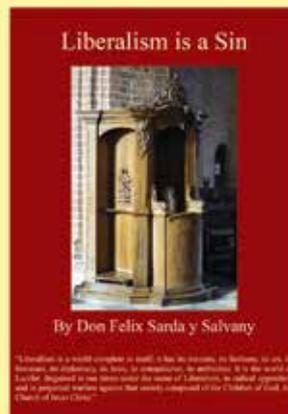
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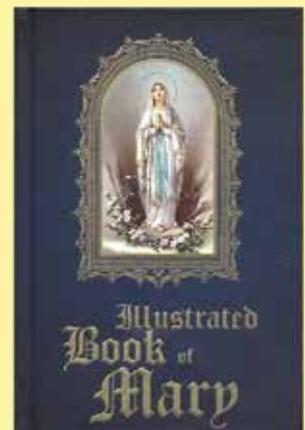
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