

Monks of Norcia counter pandemic with processions, traditional prayers against pestilence

Martin Bürger

Hidden away in the hills of central Italy, the Benedictine monks of Norcia are countering the coronavirus pandemic with prayers against pestilence and daily processions.

“In the afternoon, we process through the property with relics of the True Cross, praying for liberation from ‘plagues, famines and wars,’ as did the ancients, who knew these tribulations often arise together,” wrote Father Benedict Nivakoff OSB, the prior of the community famous for its beer and its Gregorian chant.

“Every morning, during the solemn high Conventual Mass, we have added prayers against pestilence,” the monk explained.

The monastery is located just outside the town of Norcia. When praying the Divine Office and celebrating Mass, the monks follow the Church’s traditional liturgy.

The prayers against pestilence, as found in the Votive Mass for the

Deliverance from Death in Time of Pestilence, point out that God does not will “the death of the sinner but that he should repent.” The Collect asks God to welcome with pardon “Thy people’s return to Thee: and so long as they are faithful in Thy service, do Thou in Thy clemency withdraw the scourge of Thy wrath.”

The Secret, which is the prayer before singing the Preface, implores God to accept the sacrifice of the Mass offered by the priest, in order for it to “release us from sin and deliver us from all ruin and destruction.”

“Graciously hear us, O God our Savior: deliver Thy people from the terrors of Thy wrath, and assure them of that safety which is the gift of Thy mercy,” asks the final prayer, known as Postcommunion.

According to Fr. Benedict, “Our region of Umbria’s population is geographically dispersed, so the cases of coronavirus around us are fewer than in the far north.”

However, the monks are aware that the situation might change quickly. Given that people in Italy are now largely confined to their own homes, he continued, hiddenness from the world “takes on an almost sacramental symbolism during this extraordinary crisis.”

The monks are welcoming the hiddenness of the Mass as an invitation to rediscover the mystery “of the Mass’s unseen efficacy,” which has been forgotten in modern times. “We must rely on an invisible medicine for our ultimate salvation in the face of this invisible threat.”

“For centuries,” Fr. Benedict wrote, “it was not possible to see up-close the mysteries of the altar. In certain periods, curtains were drawn at the most important moments of the Mass. Still today, the solemn prayers of consecration are said in the lowest of tones – a whisper – as the drama of the liturgy unfolds.”

The monks of Norcia are no strangers to tragedy. Monastic life in Norcia, the birthplace of Saints

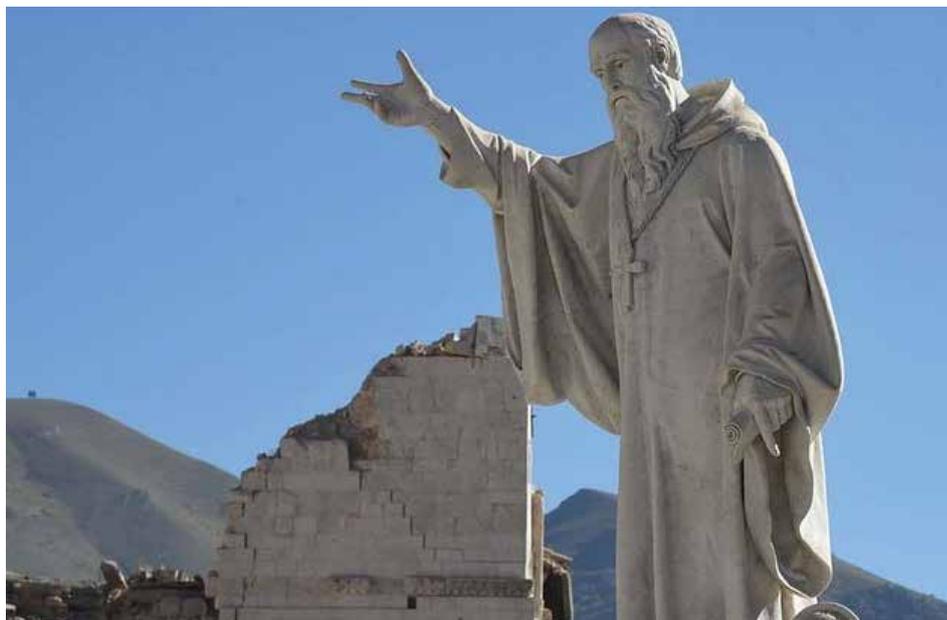


Benedict and Scholastica, began again only in 2000.

Until 2016, when a severe earthquake hit Norcia, the monks were living in the centre of the town, celebrating Mass and praying the Divine Office in the basilica of San Benedetto. Due to the destruction, the monks relocated to a former Capuchin monastery, which had been damaged by a prior earthquake, just outside of the town.

In 2019, after breaking ground and beginning to raise the walls, the community added a motto to the monastery's crest: Nova Facio Omnia. "Taken from the Book of the Apocalypse," the monks explained on their website, "it describes the New Jerusalem in all its splendor and underlines what Christ does for all who cooperate with His plan: 'Behold, I make all things new!'"

"We should be willing to learn the lessons God wants to teach us," Fr. Benedict encouraged Catholics. "A great temptation is to demand that God return what we have lost. In the field of tragedy, God sows seeds of new life. We all must water



A statue of St Benedict overlooks the ruins of Basilica San Benedetto in Norcia.

them with our prayers (both seen and unseen), our sacrifices and, perhaps, even our lives. But death does not have the last word."

Conservative writer Rod Dreher said the Norcia Benedictines "know how to remain steady in catastrophe. We have so much to learn from them."

"As Dom Benedict said, we are all now having to hide from the world, in our domestic cloisters, for the sake of saving lives. We

can't become too comfortable with that – I mean, we can never allow ourselves to believe that online church is anything but the barest facsimile of real church," commented the author of the 2017 bestseller *The Benedict Option*.

"I strongly endorse Dom Benedict's exhortation for us to meditate on what God is trying to teach us with this period of hiddenness. What does it mean to discover – or to re-discover – mystery?"



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