

## Message at the Beginning of Holy Week: A long Good Friday

My dear friends,

This Holy Week will be like no other that we have experienced. It is as though we are living a long Good Friday. We do not know how much longer it will be so.

In this new landscape, which we now inhabit, the supports and regular patterns have had to fall away. There are no public Church services for us to attend. There are no bible reflection groups, no soup lunches, no prayer meetings, no visits, no parish social engagements of any sort. Hardest of all, is the Eucharist fast, and even the opportunity of being able to visit a Church, for some quiet prayer and reflection.

We have all been thrown inward. Into our own homes and households. Into our very selves. Yet, these past two weeks have already born some new and unusual fruits, in us, as Catholics. Brother priests have told me that the daily rhythm of having to say Mass on their own, has meant that they have been praying with and for, not just the community in front of them, but for the whole Church, spread across the globe. People online, too, are sharing that they feel a deeper connection with unseen brothers and sisters. In a very good way, modern media has made us all more conscious of that fully Catholic Communion present across the entire world, and even of that unseen Communion of the Saints, who gather with us at every Mass.

Families, too, are praying more at home than they have ever done. They do so, amidst the stresses and strains of being cooped-up together, for longer than they are used to. But this brings with it, deeper reservoirs of patience and forgiveness, of tenderness towards one another. Many are following the Masses and services online, much more than we anticipated. Some do so, whilst singing their favourite hymns, playing instruments, or joining in reflective songs and choral singing on iPad, iPhone or lap top.

So many of us were captivated by that Holy Hour which Pope Francis presided over last week, when he blessed an empty St Peter's Square with our Eucharistic Lord. In doing so, he was calling down the Lord's blessing on the city of Rome and the whole world, *Urbi et Orbi*. In his words, on that evening, he reminded us of the real heroes of this time, when he said:

"It is the life in the Spirit that can redeem, value and demonstrate how our lives are woven together and sustained by ordinary people – often forgotten people – who do not appear in newspaper and magazine headlines nor on the grand catwalks of the latest show, but who without any doubt are in these very days writing the decisive events of our time: doctors, nurses, supermarket employees, cleaners, caregivers, providers of transport, law and order forces, volunteers, priests, religious men and women and so very many others who have understood that no one reaches salvation by themselves.

In the face of so much suffering, when the authentic development of our peoples is assessed, we experience the priestly prayer of Jesus: "That they may all be one" (*Jn 17:21*). How many people every day are exercising patience and offering hope, taking care to sow not panic but a shared responsibility."

With our Holy Father, I believe, that what we are witnessing is a sign of a renewed humanity.

In nature, too, these past weeks have seen the definite signs of spring. There's the deeper red, or brighter evening skies, the sound of so many birds and the budding forth of the different varieties of flower and foliage.

Although this time, so often feels like a long Good Friday, in God's good purposes, it already contains the hope of brighter and better days to come. And who knows what gifts God will have bestowed upon us, in the meantime?

I think this is why, words from a popular song, originally written by Amanda McBroom, and sung by many, stir in my mind. The song is called *The Rose* and the last stanza goes like this:

“When the night has been too lonely, and the road has been too long,  
And you think that love is only for the lucky and the strong,  
Just remember in the winter, far beneath the bitter snows  
Lies the seed, that with the sun's love, in the spring becomes the rose”

I always like to think that the seed is our deepest self, buried deep down within us, now being loved, not just by the sun present in our sky, but by the Son, Jesus Christ.

So, as we live through this long Good Friday, let us try to remember; “in the winter, far beneath.....lies the seed that with His love, in the spring becomes the rose.”

Our sharing in the Son of God's dying, in this long Good Friday, is a real participation in His redemptive act of love, for all. It will bring forth fruits, unknown now, for each of us, for our Church and especially for our world. In this, is our hope.

God bless you.

Please, pray for me.

+ Mark O'Toole .

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Bishop of Plymouth