

THE Aquinas Way

Greetings, Theological Reflections and Spiritual Resources
during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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MICHAEL MASCARI, OP

BULLETIN II – APRIL 10, 2020

Greetings from the Vice-President and Academic Dean

April 10, 2020
Good Friday

Dear Members of the Aquinas Community,

Today we celebrate the great mystery of Christ's passion and death. As we do every year, it is an opportunity for us to reflect on the extraordinary love that God has for us, a love that Christ showed in his perfect gift of himself. This gift has a special meaning this year, as we experience the isolation, the stress, and perhaps even the fear that the COVID-19 pandemic has created among us. We worry about the safety and health of our families, but also about our jobs and our ability to support them, as our economy and even the ordinary social structures of our world gradually shut down. It is easy enough for us to ask where is the Lord in the midst of this confusion. Of course, there are no easy answers.

Yet the message of Good Friday is clear to us today, just as it is each year. Our God is here with us, present with us, suffering with us and giving himself away for us. This is the deepest meaning of the Triduum when we celebrate the mystery of Christ's dying and rising. In this mystery we see the lavish gift of a God who from all eternity has given himself away in love, and who has done so in history, in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. The cross is not merely a poignant expression of this selfless love, it is something more than that. It is a striking sign of God's infinite care for us. For in the cross Christ not only gives himself away even unto death, he does so in such a way that we now experience the healing, the integration, and the reconciliation that he alone can give.

Because of Christ and his cross, no longer are we forced to live separated from God, from one another, and from ourselves. Indeed, beneath the social isolation, the loneliness, and the fragmentation that each of us is encountering at the present



time, there is a new wholeness and a unity that has been made possible through this mystery of Christ's suffering and death. We have been reconciled and restored to God, and in our reconciliation with him we find ourselves united to those we love in a new way, even as the divisions within each one of us are healed. Deprived as we are this year of the Bread and Cup that we share in the celebration of the Eucharist, we are not denied the intimate communion that exists between Christ and each one of us. It is his extraordinary gift to us this day.

As we reflect upon this mystery of Christ's love and the incomprehensibility of his gift, I invite you to consider the words of Fr. Paul Murray, O.P., one of the Dominican Order's foremost theologians and a master of the spiritual life. I am confident that his insights on the meaning of this special time will be a source of inspiration to you.

May the Lord bless you and all of those you love during these special days.

Yours in Christ and St. Dominic,

Fr. Michael A. Mascari, OP
VICE PRESIDENT AND ACADEMIC DEAN

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Poet-theologian says isolation can bring gain as well as loss

Editor's Note: This is part one of a two-part interview with Dominican Father Paul Murray. Part two will be published shortly.

ROME – Dominican Father Paul Murray is one of English-language Catholicism's most prominent contemporary theologians and poets. Born in Northern Ireland in 1947, he joined the Irish Dominican Province in 1966 and was ordained in 1973.

Murray has published five collections of poetry, including *Scars: Essays, Poems, and Meditations on Affliction*, and most recently, *Stones and Stars* in 2013, in addition to numerous books and essays on theology. He teaches the literature of the mystical tradition at Rome's Dominican-run University of St. Thomas Aquinas, universally known as the "Angelicum."

Crux recently reached out to Murray via email to talk about the spiritual significance and fallout of the coronavirus pandemic. The following are Murray's responses.

***Crux:* Is the obvious historical parallel to what we're experiencing the plague, or is that too facile? What does the situation call to mind for you?**

Murray: I'd say there are real parallels between what is happening today with the present pandemic and the plagues and pandemics of the past. What's more, there are things which we can learn from the wisdom of the Christian response in those early centuries.

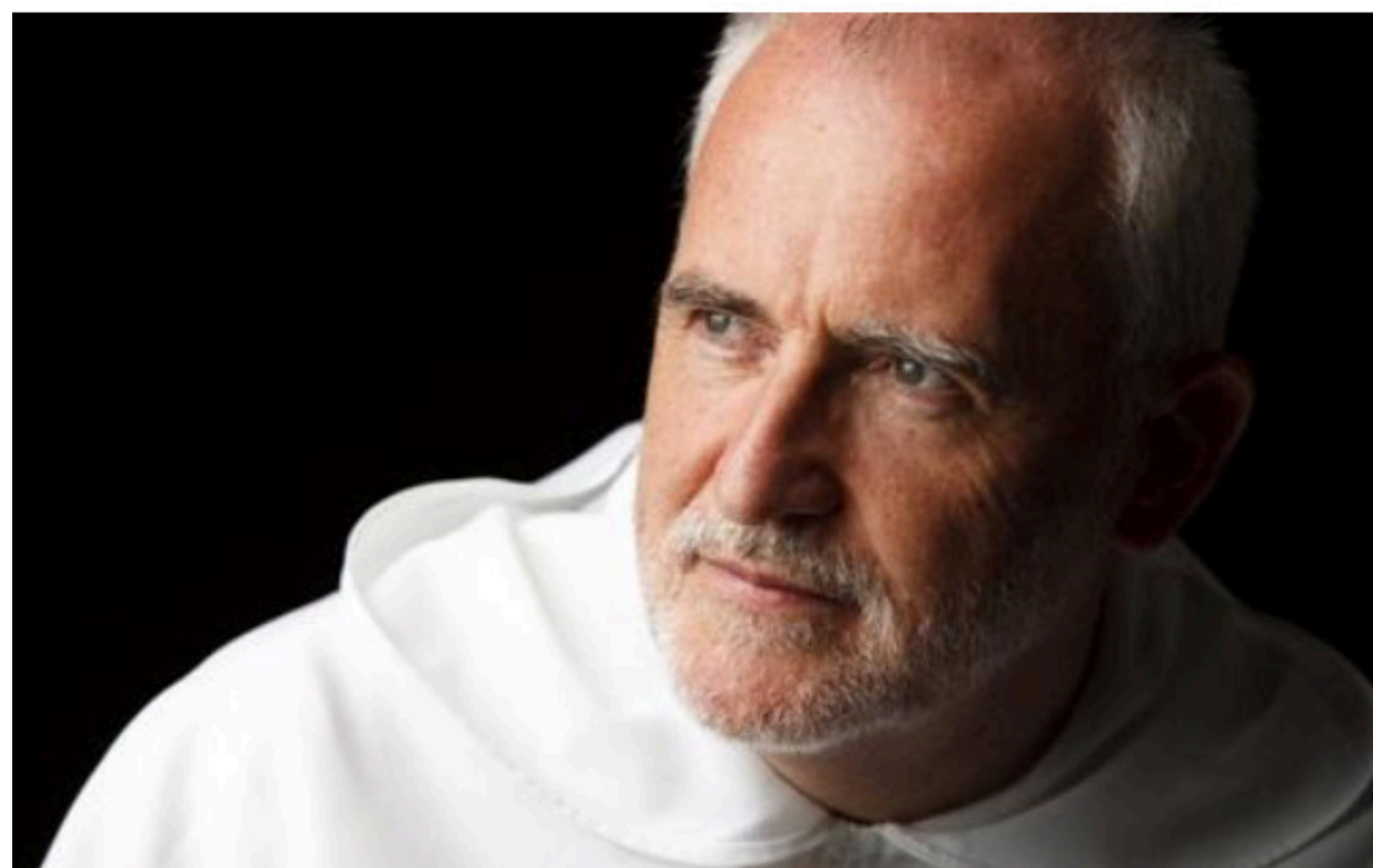
I have particularly in mind here the response of St. Cyprian, the Bishop of Carthage, to the pandemic which afflicted the Roman Empire in the third century. It's said that in Rome, at the height of the outbreak, approximately 5,000 people were dying every day. This pestilence was the second of two pandemics which marked the very first transfers from animal hosts to humanity, something that's characteristic, of course, of the present corona virus.

St. Cyprian, while recognizing the appalling nature of the pandemic, saw it first and last as an opportunity for the strengthening of faith and hope. In his opinion the situation called for enormous courage and enormous trust.

"What a grandeur of spirit it is," he declared, "to stand up with living faith before "the onsets of devastation and death" and, instead of being paralyzed by fear, to "embrace the benefit of the occasion." By this Cyprian meant the opportunity for Christian believers to manifest to those around them a willingness to bear the cross of the moment and, at whatever cost, to do everything they could to assist those in the greatest need.

But why had this pestilence come upon the world? If God really cares for us, where is God to be found in all of these catastrophes? The response Christian spirituality gives to this question - and it is the question of all questions - possesses little or nothing of the bright cleverness of a well-argued, academic answer.

Instead, with humility and reverence, all four Gospels together, and with them the great spiritual tradition, direct our attention first and last to the figure of Christ Jesus on the cross. It is to that presence, and not to some kind of abstract, indifferent deity, that we are encouraged to bring all our doubts, and all our anguished questions.



Dominican Father Paul Murray.

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(continued)

An Interview with Dominican Father Paul Murray (*continued*)

And while we ourselves are engaged in searching for answers, while we are presuming to put our questions to God, there is a sense in which, St Cyprian reminds us, God is questioning us, God is engaged in probing and searching our hearts.

Cyprian writes: “How fitting, how necessary it is that this plague and pestilence which seems horrible and deadly, searches out the justice of each and every one, and examines the mind of the human race, asking whether or not those who are healthy are caring for the sick, whether relatives dutifully love their kinsmen as they should, and whether doctors are refusing to abandon the afflicted in their charge.”

Many bishops, faced with the suspension of public Mass, have been emphasizing “spiritual communion.” In light of the Catholic spiritual tradition, are there any reflections you’d like to share?

First of all, let me state the obvious: for countless thousands of Catholics today it is nothing less than a tragedy to find themselves unable to attend Mass, and so unable to receive Christ in Holy Communion. In light of this unhappy situation the advice now being offered by the bishops for all those at present in isolation to begin practicing what has been traditionally called “spiritual communion” is unquestionably wise.

Of course, as a spiritual practice, it is nothing as great as actual attendance at Mass. And it may well appear, at first, as a very poor substitute indeed. But “spiritual communion” is in itself a tremendous grace, as has been attested by saints and theologians over the centuries. St Teresa of Avila, for example, has this to say: “When you do not receive communion, and you do not attend Mass, you can make a spiritual communion which is a most beneficial practice; by it the love of Christ will be greatly impressed upon you.”

Spiritual communion, when it is authentic, always has at its core a desire to be one with Christ in the Eucharist. Desire of this kind I was privileged to witness once in the life of a prisoner on death row.

Catholic Mass had not been celebrated in that particular part of the prison for several years. The prisoner in question, a Catholic, struck me as a very ordinary guy. All the more striking, therefore, was the strength, the force, of his desire to attend Mass and to receive the Eucharist. He asked the authorities of the prison that Mass be celebrated at least on Sundays, and he kept on asking although ordered to stop. After some considerable time, permission was granted, but only after he had suffered a great deal.

When, some months later, I celebrated Mass for him and for a small number of other prisoners on Death Row, I noticed that he wept at the moment he received the host. And, just after the Mass, when I spoke to him through the bars, I noticed that once again tears were flowing down his cheeks. He said to me: “It’s only when you are deprived of something that you realize how precious it is!”

Are there any particular stories from the Christian past, stories from the lives of the saints, for example, which stand out for you as examples of “spiritual communion”?

There are, of course, a great number of stories which could be recalled in this context. But the story which, for me, most stands out is the story of the imprisonment of the Carmelite poet and mystic St John of the Cross. Captured and taken from his priory, John was forced to live in appalling conditions, beaten regularly, and almost starved to death. He appealed to the authorities to be given permission to attend Mass, but this request was refused.

Astonishingly, it was in these dreadful conditions that John began to write what is arguably the greatest mystical poetry in the Catholic tradition. One of the poems speaks of the fountain of living water welling up in the heart of the believer, but always within the darkness of faith:

“How well I know the spring that brims and flows, although by night!” The poem’s brief concluding stanzas constitute a meditation on the Eucharist. The first begins: “This eternal fountain is concealed from sight / Within this living bread to give us life.” Here, although John is cut off from the Mass, he finds that in a real way he is present to the mystery, his whole attention focused on the Eucharist. The final stanza reads: “I long for this, the living fountain-head, / I see it here within the living bread, / although by night.”

Over the centuries, Christian men and women, when deprived of the sacraments, discovered in their need some rather surprising ways of practicing spiritual communion. A bishop from Bulgaria told me many years ago that, during a certain period of Communist persecution in his country, almost all the priests of his diocese were either dead or in prison. As a result, the people of God, when they wanted to go to Confession, would go to the graves of the priests, and it is there they would confess their sins to God.

SPIRITUAL RESOURCES

Pope Francis' Liturgies

Aleteia will be streaming the Pope Francis' Liturgies. They are also providing links for some special opportunities to draw close to Relics of the Passion. <https://aleteia.org/2020/04/07/holy-week-whats-live-streaming-and-when/>

Meditation on the Seven Last Words

Current student, Br. Jordan DeGuire, OP, provides a meditation on the Seven Last Words available through St. Paul Catholic Center (where he is currently serving on Pastoral Year): <http://www.hoosiercatholic.org/sevenlastwords.html>

COVID-19 Resources from The Catholic Health Association

The Catholic Health Association of the United States has created a list of COVID-19 resources which provide information regarding bioethics, palliative care, pastoral care, spiritual resources, and a wealth of credible resources for anyone with questions about this pandemic. <https://www.chausa.org/newsroom/coronavirus-resources/spiritual-resources-for-covid-19>
<https://www.chausa.org/newsroom/coronavirus-resources>

COVID-19 Resources from The US Conference of Catholic Bishops

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops provides a page of resources for Catholic at home during the COVID-19 crisis. <http://www.usccb.org/about/communications/resources-for-catholics-at-home-during-covid-19.cfm>

Free Formational Events

The National Federation of Catholic Youth Ministers has a collection of one-hour formational events presented free to ministry leaders and volunteers as part of their mission to support and strengthen those who accompany young people as they encounter and follow Jesus Christ. <https://nfcym.org/resources/webinars/>

Family Resources to Pray Together from Home

The United States Association of Catechesis of the Good Shepherd provides a wonderful page of resources for parents and families to pray together from home. <https://www.cgsusa.org/homepage/covid-19-response/>

“Christianity in a Time of Sickness”

Article by Tomas Halik in *America* magazine, April 3, 2020. <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2020/04/03/christianity-time-sickness>

Friarly.com

This project is a collaborative effort of the Dominican Student Brothers of St. Dominic Priory in St. Louis, Missouri. The COVID-19 resource page offers a number prayer and liturgical resources including the daily preaching by one of the Dominican friars. <https://www.friarly.com/covid-19-resources.html>

Today's Word of Hope

Daily reflections during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis offered by Fr. James Marchionda, OP, Provincial of the Dominican Central Province of St. Albert the Great. <http://opcentral.org/blog/category/a-word-of-hope/>

SPIRITUAL RESOURCES

Reflections from Fr. Cristobal Torres, OP

Fr. Cristobal a graduate of Aquinas Institute of Theology and a friar from the Southern Province of St. Martin de Porres. He serves as University Chaplain at Barry University and offers a short daily reflection on the Barry University Campus Ministry Facebook page.

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CHURCH: Catholics Helping Us Reach Catholics at Home

This is a public Facebook group facilitated by Firebrand+ (created by Aquinas graduate, Jared Bryson, and his business partner, Katie O'Brien Pasha). The CHURCH group is a portal to see how people are sharing our faith in unique ways during this unprecedented time. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/2421826451252058/>

“Spirituality for a Time of Scarcity” by Fr. Charles Bouchard, OP

Former Aquinas Institute President, Charles Bouchard, OP is the senior director of theology and ethics at the Catholic Health Association of the United States. This article, “Spirituality for a Time of Scarcity” was recently published in the National Catholic Reporter. <https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/spirituality-time-scarcity>

From Liturgical Press

- Complimentary access to the April digital editions of ‘Give Us This Day,’ a daily prayer resource with scripture reflections, inspiration from the lives of saints, and simplified morning and evening prayer. <https://offers.giveusthisday.org/free-resources>
- Resources in English and Spanish called, ‘Holy Week at Home.’ <https://offers.litpress.org/coronavirus-response-to-customers>

Please share your comments and suggestions with

Erin Hammond at registrar@ai.edu

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. ROMANS 8:38-39