

*Mary, Our Mother, and Consolation In this Time of Peril*  
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On the Friday before Palm Sunday, Pope Francis focused his homily on the Sorrowful Mother, an ancient feast traditionally celebrated on that day. He listed the seven sorrows of Mary, the last four of which concern Mary's participation in the passion and death of her beloved son. One can only imagine how her heart was pierced by pain as she met Jesus on his path to Calvary. Already bloodied and weakened by his scourging, he makes his way, burdened by the cross, crowds jeering at him. In this chaos their eyes meet. But it was not yet finished. She later stood at the foot of the cross with a few women and John amidst a crowd who chided, ridiculed and laughed at Jesus. While nailed to the cross Jesus spoke only to his Father, the good thief and lastly to his mother. He gave John to his mother and then entrusted his mother to John. Her heart is wounded again as the body of the man whom she once cradled as an infant in her arms in Bethlehem is now bloodied and broken and, in the image so powerfully depicted in the Pieta, laid across her lap. Then she, accompanied by John and the women who grieved with her, laid Jesus' body to rest.

While the Church over the centuries has honored Mary with many honorific titles, Pope Francis in his March 25<sup>th</sup> homily noted that the Scriptures offer only two titles for Mary: mother and disciple. She became mother when she accepted the invitation of the Angel Gabriel to be the mother of the messiah. She remained mother throughout Jesus' life and beyond. At the foot of the cross, she became mother to us all. She became a disciple because she came to see in Jesus and his message the reality of the Kingdom which he announced. In the Gospels, she is several times mentioned as being with the disciples, and in Acts of the Apostles, she is included with the disciples who were gathered in the upper room and was with them at Pentecost.

Outside of the infancy of Jesus and his crucifixion, where she plays unique roles, the only other time that Mary actually is recorded as speaking was at the wedding feast of Cana where she notices that the sponsors of the feast were running out wine. She mentions this to Jesus who responds that his hour had not yet come. Mary simply informs the stewards to do as Jesus tells them. There is an assurance in Mary that Jesus will take care of it.

Today the whole world is unified by the infiltration of a virus. There are no barriers, no borders, no walls that prevent the spread of this virus which brings with it immense suffering, disorientation, fear and death. It has infected hundreds of thousands of individuals, overwhelmed health care systems, closed businesses, schools, and areas of recreation and amusement, created massive unemployment and left millions without resources for food and housing, disrupted every aspect of human society and killed now over 30 thousand of our fellow sisters and brothers. People are left with desperate questions as to why this has happened and to whom they can turn for answers, consolation, or solace.

We are not alone. We have never been alone. Even in spite of our waging wars and our obsession with creating more and more lethal weapons at the expense of feeding and caring for the poor.... Even in our disregard for millions of refugees made homeless by wars and famine who wander the world in search of a place where they can find welcome, work and a place to settle their families with dignity... Even in spite of the walls we build to keep *others* out.... Even in spite of the few who amass huge fortunes and great power and keep the poor ever poorer... Even in spite of our total disregard for the destruction of our planet, our "common home".... there is a

loving and forgiving God whose son suffered and gave his life for us, eager to forgive and take us to himself.

Throughout our history, Mary has played a significant, almost pre-eminent, role in our Catholic spirituality. That is not surprising. Mary is the Mother given to us while Jesus hung on the cross. Emanating from her are all those qualities we associate with motherhood.

Recalling the times when we fell and scraped our knees or were embarrassed when someone made fun of us, our place of solace and comfort was in our mother's arms. Later, as we did poorly in an exam, felt alone and lonely or questioned our life choices, it was often to our mothers we came in search of wisdom, strength, and unquestioning love. For many of us, our mothers have been warmly welcomed home into the loving embrace of the God they served so well in this life.

But we are not alone. We have a mother whom we honor as the Sorrowful Mother because of the depth of pain she suffered in the passion and death of her son. He gave her to us as our mother too. I believe that Mary, like God, suffers with us now in this terrible pandemic. She welcomes us to come to her in prayer and she will embrace us with love, compassion, solace, hope and love. She knows our fears and our anxieties and she beckons us to give them to her and she will give us the peace of her son. The overwhelming situation that we experience around us now is no match for the love of her son for us to whom she will carry the heaviness of our hearts.

Pope Francis profoundly manifested his devotion to and reliance on Mary in this terrible moment in our history. On March 15, he went to visit the icon of Mary, *Salus Populi Romani*, in the Basilica of Saint Mary Major. This icon has a long history of protecting the people of Rome from plagues. His visit took place during the time that Rome was under quarantine. He walked alone on the deserted streets to the basilica where he prayed quietly and alone to the Madonna.

When the Holy Father walked into the empty Saint Peter's Square on March 27 to deliver his *Urbi et Orbi* blessing, he had brought that image of *Maria Salus Populi Romani* to a central position on the right side of the main doors of Saint Peter's Basilica. After addressing the people of the city of Rome and of the world, he went to pray before this image and reverently touched it. The image, along with the sacred crucifix of the church San Marcello, another ancient icon associated with protection from plagues, were front and center of all the ceremonies of Holy Week in Saint Peter's.

Our Holy Father sent a clear message to us. Go to Mary as a source of hope, peace, protection and love at this time of trial. We are her daughters and sons and she weeps with us as any mother would weep at the sufferings of her children. She calls us to herself where she is waiting to console, comfort, heal and love us.