

URBI ET ORBI

I believe that one of the most profound and moving religious events took place in Saint Peter's Square on Friday, March 27. It was dusk and darkening and it was raining. The Square was empty. Two sacred images from Roman churches were on display on either side of the center doors of the basilica. Both images have been central figures over the centuries with supplication and procession in times of plagues and epidemics. The icon of Mary, Savior of the Roman People was brought from Saint Mary Major Basilica and a crucifix from the church of San Marcello. On March 15 Pope Francis had made a pilgrimage to these two churches to pray in front of these images for the end of the world-wide pandemic.

Into the empty and rainy square walked Pope Francis, alone in his simple white cassock. He was alone in this square usually teeming with tourists and visitors. Usual images of the Holy Father are that he is surrounded by people waving, shouting in joy and holding babies up for him to kiss. He is always smiling and making eye contact, waving back and touching hands and foreheads. This was the source of his energy. He loves people. But tonight he is alone. Earlier in the week he told somebody that he felt he was a prisoner of his library. The most influential religious leader of our time silently walked up the stairs assisted by his always present assistant, Monsignor Marini.

The previous Sunday, during his Angela Address, the Holy Father announced that he was going to give his *Urbi et Orbi* blessing on Friday. Normally this would be done on Easter. But for him, Easter would be too late. What he saw was a world inundated with death and suffering, churches were closed, no public Masses could be celebrated in Italy and in many countries throughout the world. People were told to self-isolate themselves to avoid spreading the virus. Hospitals were overwhelmed and health care workers were stretched to the limits. He deeply felt their pain. He needed to speak to them and give them comfort and hope.

To the *Urbi et Orbis blessing* is attached a plenary indulgence which, according to Church teaching, removes all temporal punishment due to sin. It normally requires certain conditions, but Pope Francis, in this time in which people are seeking hope and solace, removed the conditions. One theologian recently commented that indulgences in the hands of Francis must be seen in the context of his "dreams of a loving, merciful, pardoning, welcoming Church." It was meant to shout to the suffering of the world, "Know that you are not alone. It will be OK." The floodgates of grace and mercy and forgiveness were thrown wide open!

The Holy Father stood under a lit canopy as the Gospel was proclaimed by a deacon. It was the selection from the Gospel of Mark. The disciples are in a boat and a violent storm stirs up the seas and threatens to sink the boat. Jesus is sleeping in the stern. The disciples woke Jesus with the cry, "do you not care? We are lost!" He awoke and calmed the wind and the sea. He turned to the disciples and asked, "why are you frightened? Have you still no faith?"

The Holy Father walked to the podium looking out at an empty square knowing that millions of people across the globe were listening and watching him, looking for some words of consolation, healing and hope. He began

For weeks it has been evening. Thick darkness has gathered over our squares, our streets and our cities. It has taken over our lives filling everything with deafening silence and a distressing void.

Using the words, “Why are you afraid? “Have you no faith?”, he fashioned a message that we were, like the disciples all in one boat in very troubled waters. We all need to row together, to rediscover our sense of community and interconnectedness. He lamented

We have all raced ahead with breakneck speed ignoring the wars, injustice and cries of the poor and our ailing planet. We carried on regardless, thinking we could stay healthy in a world that was sick.

Pope Francis reminds us that faith begins when we recognize our need for salvation. He reminded us how we need each other and need to invite Jesus into our boats and hand over our fears to him so that he can conquer them.

He counsels us that we have an anchor, the cross by which we have been saved and with that assurance we can once again listen to the proclamation that saves us: he is risen and is living by our side. By this cross we have been saved in order to embrace hope and let it strengthen and sustain all measures and all possible avenues for helping to protect ourselves and others.

He concludes his reflection with the following prayer introducing the *Urbi et Orbis* blessing

Dear brothers and sisters, from this place that tells of Peter’s rock-solid faith, I would like this evening to entrust all of you to the Lord, through the intercession of Mary Health of the People and Star of the stormy Sea. From this colonnade that embraces Rome and the whole world, may God’s blessing come down upon you as a consoling embrace. Lord, may you bless the world, give health to our bodies and comfort our hearts. You ask us not to be afraid. Yet our faith is weak and we are fearful, but you, Lord, will not leave us at the mercy of the storm. Tell us again, “Be not afraid.” And we, together with Peter, “cast all our anxieties onto you, for you care about us.”

The Holy Father continued to pray as he approached the image of Mary, Salvation of Rome. He remained in silent prayer and then reverently touched the image. He then went to the Crucifix of San Marcello where he again prayed and kissed the feet of Jesus.

Entering the antechamber of Saint Peters, the Monstrance containing the Body of Christ was brought from the Blessed Sacrament Chapel of the basilica and placed on the altar.

The Pope again silently prayed. Then he took the monstrance out to the doors of the basilica where he raised it three times giving the *Orbi et Urbi* blessing.

He had given his all. As he reentered Saint Peter's, it was clear that he was struggling with the weight of the monstrance and that his sciatica was giving him great pain as demonstrated by his more pronounced limp. Leaning heavily on the arm of Monsignor Marini, the Holy Father faded from view as he entered the Basilica to return to his home at Santa Marta.

He had wanted desperately to come to his people during this global pandemic. He had to show them that he was with them in love and prayer. He wanted to give them, by his presence and his message of hope, consolation and compassion that Jesus, who had given himself entirely to them on the cross, continues to suffer with them. But the Holy Father also wanted to assure them that the resurrection followed the cross. The Crucified One is the One who triumphed over death and remains our companion on our individual and universal journeys.

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March 30, 2020