

## Reflections on COVID-19 from St. Patrick's College Maynooth

### 'Praying thoughtfully during the pandemic' by Fr. Kevin O'Gorman

During this COVID-19 pandemic when priests and people could not physically come together to remember, sacramentally and socially, the Lord's Supper in the Eucharist, the prayer after the *Our Father* in the Communion Rite offers a fruitful space for spiritual reflection and nourishment.

Divided into seven articles it both asks and anticipates the help of God in this harrowing time of illness, isolation and uncertainty about what the future holds.

The first, '***Deliver us, Lord, we pray from every evil***', picks up on and prolongs the last petition of the *Our Father*. The poignancy of adding *every* puts into focus the presence of evil in the many forms that people experience it, especially in the course of the pandemic which brings woe and worry in ways that were previously imaginable only in fiction and film. The opening *Deliver* recognises that God is the ultimate source of our salvation (from the Latin *salus*, well-being and safety). It is also a reminder that, as Pope Francis declares, 'Jesus taught us to ask daily for deliverance from "the evil one" lest his power prevail over us' (*Rejoice and Be Glad*, 160).

The second '***graciously grant peace in our days***' gathers together the two great signs of God's presence and power in the Holy Spirit. From the Latin for gift, grace is the ground of God's life in us that is the basis of growth in goodness and holiness. The Christian understanding – and undertaking – of peace is positive, presupposing not only the absence of conflict but promoting the fullness of life that sharing in the paschal mystery of Christ invites us to inherit. Again, '*in our days*', adds an urgency to the petition to protect us from peril and preserve us in peace through the course of the pandemic

The third, '***that, by the help of your mercy***', takes us to the heart of the Gospel. Commenting on the parable of the prodigal son Pope emeritus Benedict XVI states that 'above all, this Gospel text has the power of speaking to us of God, of enabling us to know His face and better still, His heart'. This revelation of God is realised in the mission of mercy that is manifested in the compassion that Jesus continually shows in the course of his ministry and completes with his suffering on the cross.

The helping heart of God leads to the fourth, that '***we may be always free from sin***'. A time of lockdown does not put love on the long finger but leads us to seek newer and deeper ways of imagining and incarnating love of God and neighbour. Desiring to be 'always free from sin' demands an awareness that the assistance of the Holy Spirit is a continual ask. It is in God's faithfulness and forgiveness that we finally find freedom as the children of a merciful Father.

The second wing of God's helping mercy is to keep us '***safe from all distress***'. This prayer for divine protection calls to mind the confidence of the Psalmist, that 'God is for us a refuge and strength, a helper close at in time of distress' (45:1). In this time of distress, with daily statistics of disease and death, we ask for the strength of the Holy Spirit to sustain us, to support all

who serve the sick and serve society in so many ways, to drive away despair and fear from the future.

The sixth article shifts from asking to announcing, '**as we await the blessed hope**'. Building upon the human need to hold families and friends together in the long and lonely hours of social distancing and separation, faith unfolds the horizon of hope for the church cut off from its sacramental celebrations in the present. As we anticipate the 'blessed hope' of holiness in heaven we trust that, in the words of Dame Julian of Norwich who lived through the Black Death, 'all shall be well and all manner of thing[s] shall be well'.

The seventh culminates with the assurance of faith in '**the coming of our Saviour, Jesus Christ**'. The prophet Hosea's confidence that the Lord 'will come as certain as the dawn' (6:3) is surpassed by the joyful conviction that even (and eventually) when the dawn expires on earth, Jesus the Lord will come in glory to gather the harvest of God's Kingdom. Associated in the Creed with judgement, this article asks that Christians put prayer into practise and perform the corporal works of mercy so as 'to bring forth fruit in charity for the life of the world' (*Vatican Council II, Decree on the Training of Priests*, 16).

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