How the pope put ‘truth on display’ in an empty St. Peter’s Square

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Pope Francis holds the monstrance as he delivers his extraordinary blessing “urbi et orbi” (to the city and the world) during a prayer service in the portico of St. Peter’s Basilica at the Vatican March 27, 2020. The service was livestreamed in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

Even before Pope Francis had made his way across the hauntingly empty St. Peter’s Square to the chair from which he would begin his “Urbi et Orbi” liturgy on Friday, March 27, my face was already a waterfall of tears.

I had been aching for a priest to visit me, to talk to me about the power of Jesus to transform evil and here he was. And I didn’t want him to just talk. I wanted to see that he believed. I wanted to see that he was human and scared, too. And that he also absolutely trusted that Jesus Christ is who He says He is — the one who we have believed and assented to.

This coronavirus moment we are all living through is exposing unbelief and belief. I know there are priests doing extra holy hours in their rectories for the sick, and for the faithful who are aching to receive Jesus in the Eucharist again. I see some
of them at all hours letting people in as close as they can on Facebook and YouTube. Some of them have tried to get creative — drive-in Mass, drive-through Confession, parking-lot Eucharistic adoration.

These are things I never thought I’d be endorsing, but given the circumstances, by all means, bring them on!

Like many, I’ve been aching to receive the Eucharist again. At times, I’ve felt the sudden urge to break down the doors of a church to be present for Mass again. Believe me, I understand the power of spiritual Communion, but I’ve been Catholic long enough to know that the Real Presence is something — maybe even everything. And so we should long.

I think I started tuning into Pope Francis’s livestreamed Masses at Santa Marta in the Vatican in the wee hours of the morning around the time he cautioned against draconian measures in the face of coronavirus — a statement that was followed by the Diocese of Rome reversing its decision to shutter every church in the city.

Like the good pastor he is, he wants to keep people safe. If someone gets sick in a church, the possibility of exponentially exposing others is real and grave; if you don’t know you have the virus, you would not even know to work to protect those who might be most vulnerable who you might encounter from it.

But Pope Francis also knows that man cannot live on bread alone. And so, he wants to see people connected to the Mass, like so many priests around the world have now tried to do in their respective parish communities.

And he must know, too, that his priests need his fatherhood, too. We believe apostolic succession means something, and by having us gather around the world and meditate on Scripture together and pray together, he transmits a paternal sense of confidence to us all: That our faith is real. That we can go forward boldly, even with this evil virus in our midst. That there is Someone more powerful than gloves, Lysol wipes, and social distancing. More powerful than this damned virus itself or even a cure.

The questions that he kept asking during his meditation should shake us to the core: “Why are you afraid? Have you yet no faith?”

I asked a friend two nights later: “I’ve ordered a grocery delivery from Instacart. Do you think that was a terrible, dangerous mistake?” He told me his wife had done the same thing earlier. She had washed everything purchased with soap and
water. He said: “At a certain point, you do what you can, but if it’s your time, it’s your time. We are being careful. We are not going out. We are using gloves.” And we know who we are and what we are about, was the whole tone of the rest of the conversation. There’s something to this. This is where unbelief and belief come to light.

One of the unexpected opportunities, if that’s the right word, of our current circumstances, is I get to catch a lot of Masses, at a lot of different places, right at my computer. On the Sunday before Palm Sunday, every celebrant I caught mentioned the pope’s Urbi et Orbi message and its power. And it wasn’t the words, though they were convincing. It was the Truth on display.

We know Who to go to in times of trial. At Saint Patrick’s Cathedral, Archbishop of New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan spoke to an empty cathedral about a visit he had once made to a hospital. A patient, seeing he was a priest, shared that he was just told that he was going to die. And he wanted this priest to help him get a second opinion. When Dolan said he couldn’t help with that, the man started talking his language: He said that he wanted to live forever. Now that’s the business of the Church! That’s what we are about, because that’s what Jesus promises those who believe, who give their lives for Him.

In one hour, in one act that millions around the world tuned into live (and that many more watched afterwards), Pope Francis, a pastor for the world, reoriented us during his Urbi et Orbi blessing. Yes, this world has its complications. But it is not so complicated with Christ. Look to Him. Trust in Him. For real. If anyone can guide us on our next steps, it is Him. Meeting us where we are at (as the good Jesuit that he is) and in the case of we Americans, perhaps telling us in a special way: It’s not in any politician you trust, it’s in God. Doesn’t it say that even on your money? Perhaps that’s the ultimate reminder when everything seems like it’s falling apart, when all our false security is no more.

Of everything he said or did, the sitting quietly in front of our Eucharistic Lord, doing nothing but begging in the depths of his heart for peace and healing and true faith for all who can open their hearts to His love, to ask for His mercy, to cooperate with His grace. And then, after the silence, he blessed the city of Rome and the whole world.

What more could he do? He brought us to the Word of God, with a Gospel reading and a meditation on it based on what we are collectively going through, this Passion walk we all have found ourselves on this Lent — this “Lentiest Lent,” as
some have put it quite appropriately on social media. And then, with so many eyes on Him, He took Jesus and blessed us. Were you begging for the salvation of souls? How many who are so far from Christ are beginning to see Him now? Even those of us who go to Mass, who consider ourselves devout – are we seeing things differently, more clearly? Do we want to bring Him to others, too?

At one point in his meditation, Pope Francis said: “Faith begins when we realize we are in need of salvation.” It’s a hard word to swallow, if we think about it seriously: Is this coronavirus bringing us to be at peace with the fact that this is all that matters? When we sit on a hospital bed suffering from coronavirus, we surely will fight, but faced with the possibility of death, what is it that matters? The fact of the matter is that no bit of financial planning can necessarily help your family navigate what is to come. No one really knows. What matters is where we are with God and the testimony of that truth being at the heart of the matter of our lives. That’s the case whether our biggest threat of the moment is coronavirus, a heart attack, or a freak accident.

With every kind of anxious headline being a part of our coronavirus lives, Pope Francis — our Holy Father, indeed — focused us on our hope, Jesus Christ — and the only certain and enduring and everlasting gift we can offer with our love to anyone we care to love. Let’s live this message, live this love, as we enter into the final stages of Lent and then to Easter. May our souls be resurrected from whatever darkness the routines of the world have had our souls suffocating.

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