

Memorial Mass for Victims of COVID-19 – April 3, 2020 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of Saint Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – Streamed on Facebook, 7:30pm – 825 words

Thank you for tuning in this evening to this Memorial Mass for the victims of COVID-19. Nearly 60,000 people – quite probably many more – have already died in this pandemic, and we know that those numbers are still growing. Here in Alabama, the disease has not even reached its peak yet. In that sense, this Mass may seem premature. But we need to start praying for this disease’s dead, and we will continue to do so. And it’s also important that we have a Mass like this, since many at this time are not able to have a proper funeral Mass. So I thank you for joining me in prayer this evening.

I deliberately chose this Friday before Palm Sunday for this Memorial: for historically, this has been the commemoration of Our Lady of Sorrows in Passiontide. That commemoration, in fact, is still reflected in the prayers of the daily Mass for this day – although tonight we are obviously celebrating a requiem. The image of our Blessed Mother standing beneath her Son’s cross and sharing in a singular way in his Passion, is one that has always given the Christian people hope. She stood by her Son in his “hour” – his supreme trial – and we have perceived her presence with us through our trials, also.

She has, no doubt, been close to those who, so often, are dying alone from the coronavirus; yes, even when they did not know that she was there. She loves us all. She supported her Son till he won the victory, and her goal is to help us do likewise, so that He may win the victory in each one of us, too. I think that this is one of her special gifts to us: to come near us in a powerful way whenever we face the cross. We ask her now to intercede for those who have died and to be there to welcome them into her Son’s embrace – and to console grieving family members and friends.

Now I said that many are dying alone; I meant that in the sense that, in hospitals and institutions, at least, it is generally not permitted for family or friends to be bedside with the victims of this disease – and for very good reason, however difficult that is to accept. But the doctors and nurses were certainly there, and we do not forget their crucial presence and essential work. In a real way, they are fulfilling the role of our Blessed Mother by the cross, and for that, they deserve our recognition and prayers. Their work is no doubt extremely exhausting and draining; may God bless them as we thank them.

We are about to enter Holy Week. My mind this year goes to Spain, where Holy Week is celebrated seemingly by all – even by those who forget the church the rest of the year. The city of Seville, in particular, is famous for its great processions. And one of the most beloved processions is the one with the renowned statue of Our Lady – known locally as “La Macarena”, not to be confused with the banal dance from the 1990s. Our Blessed Mother is depicted in that image as Our Lady of Sorrows, with incredible life-like tears streaming down her face – yet she is officially known as “Our Lady of Hope”.

Yes, she is “our life, our sweetness, and our hope”, as we pray. She knows what we are going through. She knows what those dying in this pandemic are suffering. She is close to the brokenhearted, for a sword of sorrow pierced her own heart. She is close to the fearful, for she herself was tempted mightily with fear, though she always kept faith. And she is close to those who are alone or feel alone, for in addition to the sorrow of seeing her Son die a terrible death, she experienced also the solitude of abandonment by so many of his closest disciples. She “gets it”; she is our hope; she will help us all through this time.

So we turn to her always: we lift up the souls of the victims of COVID-19; we ask her to console their family and friends, and to pray in a special way for the great members of the medical profession who are the heroes of this time. We do not forget the hospital chaplains and

other clergy who are attending to the suffering, either. A trial like this can tempt us to turn in and take shelter in fear and even despair. But hope always remains! Our Lady of Sorrows tells us, from her place beneath the cross: “Don’t you see? This does not end here. There is hope! The resurrection dawns! My son, my daughter: have no fear.”

Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them. May their souls and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.