

Catechetical Cataclysms: Restored Holy Stairs give meaning to crisis

VATICAN CITY (CNS) – After 20 years of restoration work and millions in funding from benefactors worldwide, the unveiling of the Pontifical Sanctuary of the Holy Stairs in Rome was supposed to be a grand, celebratory moment slated for this spring, in time for Holy Week and Easter.

The public was going to be able to see the brilliantly revived frescoes of the passion of Christ as they climbed the shrine's central marble stairs that, according to tradition, are the ones Jesus ascended when Pontius Pilate brought him before the crowd and handed him over to be crucified.

But, like the tomb on Easter, the shrine was empty.

The shock of a nationwide lockdown and the ongoing pandemic, however, have resurrected the actual significance of the shrine and what it represents: finding strength, meaning and grace during times of difficulty, fear or suffering.

Passionist Father Leonello Leidi, rector of the sanctuary, told Catholic News Service that since the shrine opened to the public in late May, "the faithful have seen a deepened dimension of communion and union with the passion of Christ in this place."

People worldwide have been tested and tried, experiencing or witnessing illness or death from the coronavirus as well as fear, he said.

"It has become a significant moment that has to be evangelized. Therefore, this place becomes somewhere people can come to find the meaning of some of the things that are

happening," Father Leidi said.

One visitor, he said, was visibly emotional as he put on the required clear plastic gloves and protective shoe coverings before climbing the stairs on his knees.

The priest said he asked him what was wrong, and the visitor replied, "I was stricken by COVID, hospitalized and I also went through a very precarious situation. Now I've recovered and I came to give thanks."

This man and others, Father Leidi said, see the sanctuary, which also symbolizes the promise of resurrection and new life, as a place to express gratitude for their healing.

Mary Angela Schroth, the restoration project's coordinator, said the pandemic has prompted a real understanding of "what these frescoes actually mean," especially in the Old Testament depictions of the universal Flood, the deadly rivalry between Cain and Abel, and Moses bringing God's healing to a poisoned people.

The shrine's frescoes are "linked to what we're thinking now about COVID, how is faith really helping us with these issues," she said.

Created to be not just beautiful art, but also an instrument for catechesis and meditation, the frescoes are designed to walk people through cataclysmic biblical events in preparation for a reflection on Christ's passion, said Passionist Father Marco Pasquali, a theologian and a provincial secretary of the order, which serves as custodian of the shrine.

The flood, for example, is depicted by the shrine's 16th-century artists with people struggling in churning waves, desperately grasping onto whatever material objects remain, while Noah's ark floats away on the horizon toward rays of sunlight breaking through the storm clouds.

This event, Father Pasquali said, helps describe what is happening with COVID-19.

Without a solid anchor or foundation with God, people cannot understand or “address the new things, the unexpected that is always around the corner,” he told CNS.

God’s response to suffering, Father Pasquali said, “is not to punish but to bring to himself this negative effect and transform it into something good.” But it is also a process that takes time and hard “labor to be born again.”

No longer accommodating huge crowds because of ongoing travel restrictions into Italy, in October the shrine was welcoming only a hundred or so visitors each day. People can take their time and ascend the stairs more slowly with mandatory distancing between steps.

The present circumstances actually are “favoring more of a meditative reflection on what the Holy Stairs and many other things in Rome, even the Vatican Museums,” are meant to be, that is, “a little quieter, a more meditative experience,” said Legionary of Christ Father Kevin Lixey, international director of the Patrons of the Arts office in the Vatican Museums, whose donors also generously funded restoration efforts.

The U.S. priest recalled climbing the stairs when he was a seminarian “and not really even noticing the frescoes because it was so sooty black and really unrecognizable,” and “you were really just kind of focused on the feet in front of you and trying to get to the next step.”

“Of all the projects that the patrons are involved in,” he said, the Holy Stairs is “one of the most spiritual, touching restoration projects we could do.”

For those unable to visit the shrine in Rome, Father Pasquali said, nurturing one’s relationship with God does not depend on

the specialness of the location, but on the quality of time spent in prayerful dialogue and with a willingness "to be transformed."

"Even far from here you can live the devotion of the Passion," he said, by meditating on those steps Jesus took.

It is the time, not space, that opens the door to "the grace and the opportunity to transform my life and help me to understand the problems, find the solution or deal with it. Sometimes we don't have the answers, the solution, but he can give us the strength to cope with a situation," he said.

"Jesus wasn't happy to live his passion, but he received the strength to live it for the greater good," he said. "The Holy Spirit helps us see the bigger picture and so that can be done from anywhere, starting from the devotion of the Passion that has at its (heart) Jesus, not just the stairs."