

Easter at home is an 'opportunity for faith,' Vatican official says

VATICAN CITY (CNS) – With the prospect of trying to celebrate Easter without a large parish or Vatican liturgies, Catholics still can turn a tragic situation into an experience of faith and hope, said Cardinal Beniamino Stella.

In an interview with Vatican News March 17, Cardinal Stella, prefect of the Congregation for Clergy, said that while the current lockdown in Italy will keep thousands from celebrating Easter in Rome, “today there are still possibilities to transform this tragedy into an opportunity for faith.”

“I believe that, today, technology truly allows us to live a communion that would seem virtual. But, in fact, it is not just virtual, because I believe that the Holy Spirit also passes through these new things in today’s world and speaks to hearts, speaks to consciences, speaks to little ones and speaks to great ones,” he said.

When asked about the many Christians who will be unable to celebrate Easter at the Vatican, Cardinal Stella said that the timing of the lockdown during the Lenten season is a call to prepare for Christ’s resurrection in their own homes.

“I believe that all these pilgrims who were on their way to Rome or to the shrines must think that their Easter and their call to conversion must take place in the family, in their small environment, where the Lord calls them to live the mystery of Easter in this time,” the Italian cardinal said.

The Italian government enacted strict measures designed to encourage people to stay home and to limit opportunities for people to unknowingly spread COVID-19 to others.

Public gatherings, including Masses, have been banned in Italy through April 3, two days before Palm Sunday. However, a notification from the Prefecture of the Papal Household stated that “the liturgical celebrations of Holy Week will take place without the physical presence of the faithful.”

The notification caused speculation that the government’s ban on public gatherings could be extended in the wake of increasing infections and deaths due to the coronavirus.

Cardinal Stella said he believed the Holy Spirit would give the grace to all Christians so that they may experience a “beautiful and profound” Holy Week, “even in the sadness of mourning, illnesses and a tragedy of which we do not know the extent and, especially, the duration.”

Citing an excerpt from Alessandro Manzoni’s experience about the plague in his book “The Betrothed,” Cardinal Stella said he personally found comfort in the author’s statement that “God never disturbs the joy of his children except to send a greater joy.”

“I found this expression truly consoling for our lives,” he said. “I believe that in the absence of rites, of physical participation, we must find in these circumstances a profound way of greater intimacy with the Lord to communicate with the church, with the sacraments.”

While this unusual Lenten season has left him with an abundance of time for prayer, adoration and reflection, Cardinal Stella said it was important for everyone to be in touch with friends and loved ones in order “to create a beautiful network that unites us in this moment.”

“I have also said it to the priests, to the parish priests. I said, ‘Invent something to communicate with your faithful; turn this moment of trial, great worry and crisis into an opportunity.’”