

Keeping the faith amid the pandemic

Traditionally, Our Sunday Visitor publishes stories of why Catholic readers around the country converted – or reverted back – to the Faith. However, in light of the novel coronavirus pandemic, all readers were invited to share their stories of how they have maintained their faith or have seen it grow during this difficult time. These stories prove that, no matter what happens in life, nothing can separate us from the love of God. Families and individuals have reclaimed prayer lives, livestreamed prayer has helped parishes, and time at home has given many a renewed appreciation for loved ones and, above all, Jesus Christ in the Eucharist.

Family Rosary and Scripture

During Holy Week, my granddaughter established a Zoom meeting for all of our families – one in Philly, two in Pittsburgh and two in Cincinnati. We started on Holy Thursday by saying the Rosary, with each child saying a decade and then the grandchildren reading verses from the Bible that were appropriate for Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday.

We plan to continue this every Saturday until the churches are back open again. This has brought our families and faith closer to the good Lord.

– *Larry Masotti, Hermitage, Pennsylvania*

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Daily Mass with the pope

Fortunately, I have been able to work from home during the pandemic. Working from home has allowed me to view Pope

Francis' daily Mass from the Casa Santa Marta. Seeing Pope Francis celebrate Mass daily has been an awesome experience. It is really cool to share the daily readings with him and to hear his homilies. An added bonus is the wonderful English translation that is provided by Sister Bernadette Reis.

– *Tom Natola, Wilmington, Massachusetts*

More time, more prayer and service



The pandemic presents a vast amount of time at home. Early on, I began by compiling a list of tasks. Among the “terrible” list were things I had avoided for too long – a thorough house cleaning, etc. It didn’t take long to drift off course, so I turned attention to God.

Our Tulsa, Oklahoma, diocese sent its parishes a dozen different cards (with photos) of men in seminaries. Taking a card, a few days ago I emailed an encouraging note to Michael Martin, who was studying in the Pontifical North American College in Rome before the pandemic. His card is now attached to my refrigerator as a reminder to pray for Michael. And just this week, he responded. The note was inspirational. What joy it brought.

Just this past week, I received a telephone call from my priest, Father Carl. He was finding time to visit with parishioners, as was hardly afforded in normal times. What a thrill this was! Do priests realize what an honor it is to receive their phone call?

Recently, our church has taken on involvement in the Catholic

Leadership Institute program. Today's quiet time has enabled me to plan and execute CLI steps. These days, we are examining our church demographics, vision, short and long range goals, most effective participation in the Mass and more.

There's always a list of things to do in a church these days. Boldly ask a priest how you might lend a hand. Maybe search for an excellent small group study and related resource materials. Find time to read. Have you read the entire Bible? Why not start today? Maybe begin with the New Testament. Fill the quiet time at home with purposeful activities and study.

– *Jim Harmon, Durant, Oklahoma*

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Stronger together

Some ask the question why God would allow this to happen. I prefer to look at the positive things that are happening. People are stepping up to help others. They are donating food to those who have lost their jobs. We have been bringing groceries to those who can't get out. Some with greater financial resources are donating large amounts to needed causes. This has brought out the generosity in many. We are remaining optimistic. People are saying that we are all in this together and we will come out of this stronger than before. This pandemic is showing us we have the ability to be strong and take care of one another. God is teaching us to have faith in ourselves, so we will believe we are capable of carrying out the spiritual and corporal works of mercy.

This event has been a royal pain, disrupting our lives. We can't attend concerts, sporting events or other recreational activities. We couldn't even attend Holy Week services. The coronavirus will eventually pass, and we will have learned much about how resilient we are. If we come together to solve

problems, we are stronger. United we have the ability to show the world God's great love for us.

– *Tony Kvedar, Clearwater, Florida*

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Journey to patience



This pandemic has been a very trying time for everyone to say the least. Being confined in a single room or home creates a great deal of tension after a while. Patience is very much needed and is very much put to the test.

As a member of the Secular Order of Discalced Carmelites, at our monthly meetings we draw slips, each with a particular virtue to work on for the coming month. At the time I picked patience. This selection now seems to me to be providential.

My wife and I are in our late 80s. A person very close to us (I'll call her Miriam) came to help us downsize and organize our household, but she then got stuck with us in our home during the coronavirus pandemic. I don't know what we would have done without her loving care.

However, she came with a lifetime of worries and fears. She has some of the psychological problems that St. Thérèse had, such as hypersensitivity, difficulty in controlling her emotions and desiring absolute certitude, which is not possible in our situation. And yet, though Miriam has been very difficult to live with, she has been a great blessing.

All households have their own problems. We have tried to follow the injunctions of St. Paul in his Letter to the

Ephesians: “Be kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving one another as God has forgiven you in Christ” (Eph 4:32).

At least during this time of confinement due to the virus, I was better able to reflect on patience and how it is very much a work in progress. St. Thérèse said that charity is putting up with the faults of others – certainly that is patience. A combination of grace and our own efforts are needed.

– *John E. Weakland, Muncie, Indiana*

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When we return to Mass



What will it be like to attend that first public celebration of the Eucharist when churches are opened after the COVID-19 pandemic?

During the penitential rite, perhaps that perfect act of contrition will be made expressing sorrow for sin – not from a spirit of fear and damnation, but from sorrow for offending God who is deserving of all our love.

When reading from the Old Testament, will we recognize the continuous infidelity of God’s chosen people and the infinite mercy of God? Will the New Testament penetrate into our hearts today and drive us to evangelize? And then when the Gospel is proclaimed, we meet Jesus Christ. The Good News that Jesus Christ proclaims is that we were not made for the tomb but for resurrection. When the Gospels are now proclaimed Sunday after Sunday, will they have new meaning for us than before the pandemic?

What will that first homily be like after the pandemic? What will the celebrant say to his parishioners who have been absent for so long. No doubt the words of the celebrant will be nearly inexpressible.

Following the homily, the Creed should burst forth from our hearts as we proudly profess our faith in God the Father, God the Son and the Holy Spirit. Hopefully we will recite or sing that last part of the Creed with a conviction we never before have experienced, "I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. I confess one baptism for the forgiveness of sins, and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come."

Then, during the Liturgy of the Eucharist, in a moment the People of God have awaited – where there is no televised Mass – the priest will speak those sacred words consecrating the bread and wine. At this moment, spiritual communions belong to the past. On this day of public celebration, there will be sacramental Communion, which we have so long desired for so many weeks. As the minister holds the sacred host before our eyes and says, "The body of Christ," we will respond, "Amen – I believe."

– *Tom Gagliano, Cordova, Tennessee*

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Experiencing holy moments



One of my favorite Bible quotes is the passage from Matthew: “For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be” (6:21). I think of that treasure as God’s love. In spite of all my sinfulness, I am loved. When we are able to trust and surrender to him, we have the potential to experience holy moments, those treasures of the heart of Jesus that he wants us to have.

I used to think that holy moments were reserved for saints, priests and individuals in religious orders, but they aren’t. God’s love has no bounds, and that is also true of holy moments. They are there for all of us to experience if we are open to receiving them.

In a holy moment, there is a separation of ourselves from the world. Our cluttered and chaotic world is absent. Those things don’t belong in a holy moment, because they don’t matter. What does matter is our focus on the Lord.

We may think that there’s not much of an opportunity for holy moments during this pandemic. We may feel detached, frustrated, sad and helpless. But it is in these times of crisis that we need God even more.

Was there a time we felt that deep love of God for us? It may have been the peace we felt when we held our loved one’s hand and they took their last breath. It may have been a hymn that we heard or even sang that brought us great joy. It may have been a time that we knelt before the Blessed Sacrament and cried because not only did we feel the pain of God’s suffering for our salvation, but felt grateful beyond words for his love for us.

The peace, the joy, the love that holy moments bring are our treasures.

– **Jackie Kierulf**, Orleans, Ontario, Canada

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Learning to not take family, God for granted



I believe during this time that all of us have been affected in some way or another in our lives. I know for us it means not being able to see our one daughter and two grandchildren on a regular basis. During this pandemic, it means that we had to go without the personal interaction of the Mass and receiving Our Lord in Communion.

For some, these reasons will be big and, for others, momentous. For me, it has taught me not to become complacent in our love for our family members, not to take for granted that we will see them the next time. It means to truly cherish each moment and each other.

As far as the Mass, it has given me a deeper love for the Eucharist, a deeper longing to be with him. How many of us walked up to receive him and would take it for granted? How many of us were just checking the box? I know I did many times as I grew in love with him through the Eucharist. I know how empty I have felt without receiving him, and how I long to do so.

During this time of COVID-19, God has granted me the graces of appreciation and love of family more deeply and a newfound love of his Son through the Eucharist. There is always a silver lining to be found, and during this time because of God's love and grace, I have found mine.

– *James Dillon, Custer, South Dakota*

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Intercession of Mary and Joseph brings peace



During the first month of the stay-at-home orders, I struggled a lot with fear and anxiety as the pandemic unfolded. Many people were testing positive for COVID-19, and some were losing their lives. It was just so strange and unexpected. I would go grocery shopping and felt like I was in a scary sci-fi movie. Still, I kept praying to find some inner peace.

So I decided to pray a novena to St. Joseph in preparation for his feast day on May 1st. I asked for his powerful intercession to have freedom from the fear and anxiety that I was experiencing, and also to pray for different needs of the world during this difficult time. A turning point came on April 28, the feast day of St. Louis de Montfort. This 17th-century saint was known for his great love and devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. In a moment of prayer that day, the Holy Spirit reminded me of a consecration to Jesus through Mary in union with St. Joseph that I did about 10 years ago. I immediately went to my bookcase and found the book, "Preparation for Total Consecration to Jesus through Mary for Families," according to St. Louis de Montfort, with daily meditations by Pope St. John Paul II. This book is published and promoted by the Apostolate for Family Consecration. I have been doing the daily readings and prayers, and my faith has become stronger each day like building spiritual muscles.

I am no longer plagued by the fear and anxiety that I was experiencing. My reconsecration day will be May 31 (the feast of the Visitation) but also this year falls on the solemnity of Pentecost! Come, Holy Spirit, fill our hearts with faith

and courage to be living witnesses of the risen Lord and bring hope and love to our world in need. All for Jesus! All through Mary! All in union with St. Joseph!

– *Jorge Sandoval, Phoenix*

The gift of livestreamed Masses



When Masses were suspended back in March, some innovative Catholic priests new to media began to devise methods of providing Masses on their web pages, livestreamed on Facebook and on YouTube. Although some Catholics had qualms and concerns about how to access the Masses, many more media-savvy people soon began tuning in regularly.

After my parish launched its Masses twice a week, I began to virtually attend daily Masses. My faith was strengthened by being able to attend daily Mass in a variety of settings with priests I knew and respected. This whole media Mass adventure has renewed my love for good and holy servant-priests who care so much about their parishioners they are willing to dive into new media outreach.

On a personal level, my faith has not been shaken while away from church, though I miss receiving Communion. If anything, I've become more aware that we have been taking for granted the awesome celebration of the Mass itself. Watching and comparing various priests celebrating Masses alone in their churches or rectory chapels, it became more obvious that they were just as reverent as though a thousand worshippers sat in the pews.

I pray that when we return to our churches after this COVID-19 pandemic, priests will continue this media outreach for their

shut-in parishioners. What's better than being able to pray the Rosary and Mass daily with your favorite priests?

– *Diane Kimble, Charleston, West Virginia*

Nothing can keep us from God



Because of the pandemic, I've experienced something of what worship was like for first-century Christians. They couldn't meet freely in houses of worship, so they gathered in homes, just like people who are persecuted for their beliefs do today in many parts of the world.

Ever since churches closed, my wife and I have been attending Mass online. And I still pray, maybe now more than ever – at home, in the car, while walking in the park – just not at church. I've also spent a lot of time reflecting on Pope Francis' statement that COVID-19 is not God's judgment on us but rather a call for us to judge what's most important and to start acting on it.

I miss the Eucharist, the communal aspects of worship and interacting with the residents of the nursing home where I serve as a volunteer. The quarantine can take away our church attendance, but it can't stop us from praying, worshipping and doing charitable work. But we have to do things in a different way. Now I call my friends and write them letters. It's not as good as a person-to-person visit, but it's something.

During this period of withdrawal from the world, I've seen my faith challenged, but at the same time in some ways it has been strengthened. Stumbling blocks, personal struggles and

heartaches are interwoven threads in the fabric of life, but so are triumphs, celebrations and moments of great joy. COVID-19 is only the latest crisis to test our faith; it won't be the last.

My heart breaks for those who have suffered greatly over the last few weeks. Many lives and livelihoods have been lost. And I lament having to stay away from church, friends and activities. More hardships lie ahead, but as we read in Romans, nothing on earth (and that includes COVID-19) can separate us from God's love (cf. 8:38-39). Absolutely nothing.

– *Melvin S. Arrington Jr., Oxford, Mississippi*

Reclaiming family and personal prayer



Living the full life of a Catholic has been difficult these past several years. But isolation has turned into a holy retreat for me in which I've grown as both teacher and student – first, by virtue of my having to reteach and guide my family into forming good Catholic habits, and second, my re-learning how to really have a prayer life.

As my children got older and permanent jobs and university obligations became the norm in my home, my family and I saw less and less of each other. Commuting schedules would keep us out late, but with the isolation, we finally set up a schedule to practice living a holy life.

We now prayerfully eat all our meals together, with grace before and thanksgiving after. In the morning, once the dishes have been cleared, we read the daily Mass, passing the readings around the table to select what spoke most powerfully to each soul. We also “talk Catholic” throughout the day.

We've learned to share ideals of the holy life as opportunities present in the house and have had numerous discussions of what that might entail in the sight of God. Then, in the evenings, we've taken out our rosaries. Conflicting schedules no longer interfere with sitting down as a family to pray in the company of our heavenly Mother.

Helping form my family with my husband means actively sustaining my own interior lives through creating the structures that would support them. So I made a prayer corner. It has a crucifix, a candle and an image of the Blessed Virgin, with the addition of family pictures and holy cards. It's a physical space where I come to quietly encounter God a little bit away from my busy household.

Before the pandemic, any personal prayer time was dictated by whether or not household work was completed, or even by fatigue. Now, prayer time is becoming more of a holy habit; it's also now easier to think of God and lift up my heart to him throughout the day. I've also gone back to meditative reading of holy literature. I've taken books that have collected dust on my shelves and begun reading meditatively, a first in years.

I am convinced that this crisis we are all facing can be turned into a holy experience for so many Catholics around the world, like it's done for me.

– *Veronica Estrada, Leander, Texas*