

At A Distance: Good Friday, 2020
Jesus, bowing his head, gave up his spirit. John 19:30

Jesus' goodbye--and his mother and disciples' goodbye to him--is surely one of the most poignant moments in the history of the world, certainly in the Christian world. On Good Friday, we remember and celebrate this moment, this goodbye of Jesus to the world, and even our own goodbye someday.

In paintings and in our imagination, we usually portray Jesus dying on the cross, while his mother, Mary, his beloved disciple John, and Mary Magdalene, stood at the foot of the cross. This is how the evangelist, John, describes it. As agonizing as his death was--probably by suffocation and loss of blood--we are consoled by the image of his mother and dear friends, loving him and caring for him in their own agony, as he nears his last breath.

More than likely, however, they were not standing by the cross and able to speak and pray with him. He was basically alone in his last moments on earth, except for a few condemned criminals beside him, a few soldiers guarding him, and some jeering bystanders. In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, they show his loved ones "looking on from a distance." So, Jesus took his last breath and gave up his spirit--alone, and among strangers.

(Pause here to take this moment in along with your own breath)

During the worldwide crisis of the Coronavirus Pandemic, one of the most devastating--and largely hidden--aspects is that the 70,000 people who have died of this so far have had to die at a distance from their loved ones. In a recent newspaper report and the media, the tears and agony of a family member of one such person are described. She was unable to do what we all instinctually want to do when someone we love is dying: to hold them and to be held, to smile and say one last "I love you" through our tears. Yet these gestures are precisely what are restricted for us at this moment. In this, as at Jesus' death, our goodbyes have to be from a distance.

How can we possibly cope with this? As Catholics, our rituals always give us strength. As with other religions, they help us to express deep feelings and to do so together. Let us re-enact one of our simplest and most touching Holy Week rituals at this time--for all of these people dying around the globe, and for Jesus. What we normally do in our churches as a part of our Good Friday liturgies is reverence the body of Jesus on the crucifix. A priest carries the cross to the front of the church and the congregation processes up to it, one by one, while a hymn is sung. Then each person takes a turn either bowing, reaching out to touch, or kissing the cross. It is one of the most profound and gripping acts of faith to participate in as well as to observe. It is the unique way that each member of the congregation does so that is most heart-warming. Everyone is different, like our faith and our relationship to Jesus. Yet it is in our togetherness as a community that we have hope of rising with Christ beyond death--his and our own.

But we can't come together this year! I want to suggest that in your own home on Good Friday you might do the following: take a crucifix in your hands, perhaps the one on your rosary or on your wall, or the one woven from last year's palm. If you have no cross available, you could take a ball point pen and trace a small cross on the palm of your hand. Then, in honor of all those who cannot get to see their loved ones while they are dying these days, bow your head and reverently kiss that cross you are holding as you say goodbye with them.

Mostly, of course, on Good Friday (or as you read this), bow or kiss goodbye to Jesus--for Mary, John, and Mary Magdalene who had to look on at a distance as their beloved Lord bowed his head and gave up his

spirit. For yourself too, as though you were there. As Catholic Christians, we do these gestures together in our minds and hearts, even if this year we are forced to do so at a distance.

At the Sacred Triduum, blessings and love to all of you from all of the priests at St. Augustine's Parish. We are with you, our people, during the time of this Coronavirus agony, with our ultimate belief in the Resurrection.

Fr. Paul Morrissey, OSA
St. Augustine parish
243 N. Lawrence St.
Philadelphia, PA 19106
spirhealth@aol.com