

A Prayer to the Holy Spirit
in the midst of the Covid-19 Pandemic
by
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On one occasion when Jesus met them, [after the Resurrection] he told them not to leave Jerusalem: "Wait, rather, for the fulfillment of my Father's promise..." They returned to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olivet [after the Ascension] Entering the city, they went to the upstairs room where they were staying...When the day of Pentecost came it found them gathered in one place.

Acts of the Apostles 1:4, 12-13 -2:1

How could we have not noticed before? After the Ascension, Jesus sends the Apostles into "lockdown" to wait for the Holy Spirit to come! They are to go back to Jerusalem. Stay in Jerusalem. They are to stay together, self-isolating as a group, staying in one room, until the Father's promise to send the Spirit is fulfilled. Not knowing what to expect, feeling threats of persecution from without and uncertainty within, they must have been filled with terrible fear and anxiety. Does the scene sound familiar?

But they are not left in uncertainty:

When the day of Pentecost came it found them gathered in one place. Suddenly ...there came a noise like a strong, driving wind which was heard all through the house where they were seated. Tongues as of fire appeared, which parted and came to rest on each of them. All were filled with the Holy Spirit. They began to express themselves in foreign tongues and make bold proclamation as the Spirit prompted them.

Acts of the Apostles 2: 1-4

The Holy Spirit finds the Apostles where they had been "quarantined," and though they were all Galileans, gives them the power to be understood in every language under heaven. Thus, through the coming of the Holy Spirit, the "mighty works of God" were proclaimed to the ends of the earth and universally understood by all. I do not think it is too fanciful to draw the analogy here with the way the sharing of knowledge and experiences on social media has brought the four corners of the world very close and made it possible for an almost instantaneous and global communication of news of the pandemic to be shared in every language and distant culture.

It remains to be seen whether this experience of the Covid-19 Pandemic will in fact lead us closer to a unity in the Holy Spirit or to a regression back to the tower of Babel, but the possibility of this crisis bringing about a true intervention of the Spirit is unmistakable. The outcome depends on what we make of the opportunity. For the coming of the Holy Spirit does not mean an instant end to the virus, or a guaranteed cure, or recovered jobs, or no more

suffering, any more than it meant the end of persecution for the early Christians. Rather it means that we may be strengthened by the gifts of Holy Spirit in such a way that when we emerge from the pandemic, we are stronger people, more loving, more united, clearer about our priorities and what we believe.

Along with the rest of the world, the Abbey has been experiencing the restrictions and challenges of living under “Stay at Home” orders since roughly mid-March 2020. We have closely followed the directives of Archbishop Leonard Blair in all matters of public worship and the guidelines of Governor Ned Lamont on all issues pertaining to the containment of the virus. Regrettably, we had to close the Abbey guesthouses, close the church of *Jesu Fili Mariae* for public worship, and make the lower monastery, unfinished as it is, our whole world until further notice. Work on the new building by necessity slowed to a mere trickle of things that could be done without the construction crews needing to come inside. Last Christmas, you may remember, we had projected that we would be finishing Phase III of the building in June or July of 2020 and celebrating soon thereafter. Instead, we seemed to see our completion date receding on a distant horizon.

And yet, simultaneously, we discovered an opening to a greater interior horizon, an intensification of prayer, a deepening of community bonds as we had to work together to protect the most vulnerable in our midst. We have been flooded with requests for prayers during this time: for those who are ill, or caring for the ill, or separated from loved ones, or out of work. We have tried to honor each request personally, renewing the Abbey’s tradition of placing prayer intentions at our statue of St. Benedict, now located inside the cloister. We have read these intentions aloud at our Communion Service each day or at the very special hour of Matins at 2:00 a.m. Our Foundresses had had the insight long ago that people who are suffering feel the pain of isolation and hopelessness most keenly in the small hours of the night, so that is when we should be especially vigilant in prayer. The widespread suffering caused by the pandemic has brought this home to us in a radical way, as we have tried to be more consciously in union with those calling on our prayers.

And we know that we have been sustained by the heroic faith of so many people praying for us. Thank you for your steadfast witness to the love of God and presence of Christ in all circumstances. As another sign of our solidarity with you, our bells ring every evening in union with bells across the land in gratitude for the first responders and frontline medical personnel. The words of John Donne, once a commonplace of English literature classes, now resonate with the poignancy of our lived experience: *No man is an island entire of itself.... Any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee. (Meditation XVII)*

By now, several months into the pandemic, much has been written about the positive effects of living in quarantine. The surging, unstoppable creativity of people across the globe has been well-documented and shared on social media. The extraordinary generosity of those reaching out to offer spiritual assistance, economic help, and much-needed entertainment to others has been a constant source of inspiration. But this re-ordering of priorities and growth in charity for one’s fellow creatures as a result of “quarantine,” should not be a total surprise. As contemplatives, living an enclosed life and taking a vow of Stability, we are, in a sense, always in

training for moments such as this. Our whole life is built on the assumption that the interior horizons of the spiritual life are real, essential, and limitlessly rewarding. No matter what state of life we are called to, we always need the renewal that comes through re-focusing our interior gaze. This time of “lockdown” has given our community a needed chance to re-invigorate our prime Mission: to pray without ceasing, with the help of the Holy Spirit, for the needs of humanity.

Taking the Apostles and Our Lady in the upper room as our model during this time of apartness, we have implored God the Father to pour out once again the gift of his Holy Spirit on a suffering world. We hope you all will join us in this effort, in whatever way is native to you and possible in your circumstances. For the more of us who unite to lift our voices in praise and prayer, especially for those who are overwhelmed by this terrible trial and cannot pray, or do not know where to turn, the more we will open a channel for the mercy of God to flow to all who need it. We cannot control or determine when the virus will end, but we can help ensure that the world on the other side of this crisis, the world which we are shaping right now by the way we treat each other, will advance however slowly toward being a more merciful, just, and loving world. We will get through this, as many are fond of saying these days, but not on human strength or ingenuity alone. It will require a new awareness of the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, especially at this critical time when restrictions start to loosen.

As we gradually and prudently get back to work, let us together place our hope in the inextinguishable fire and consoling hope of the Spirit’s sevenfold gifts:

For the gift of **Fortitude** for those ill with Covid-19 and all those whose lives have been disrupted by unemployment, displacement, and grief due to its effects.

For the gift of **Understanding** for all those family members, care givers and health professionals trying to assist the sick and dying.

For the gift of **Piety**, that there be an increase of mercy transmitted from person to person and that the spread of compassion be strong enough to overcome the devastation of indifference and fear.

For the gift of **Knowledge** for all researchers and scientists trying to discover the laws of the Covid -19 virus and find a vaccine to stop it.

For the gift of **Counsel** for all those who have to make policy decisions about how to handle the pandemic on the national and local levels, that they work together to discern when and how to re-open the countries of the world.

For the gift of **Wisdom** for all leaders, at whatever level, who hold the fate of others in their hands.

For the gift of **Fear of the Lord** that people everywhere join in acknowledging that we are not the rulers the universe, but only creatures, totally dependent on God’s love to find and maintain our proper place in his marvelous Creation.

We ask this in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.