

## THE VOID AND ITS PAIN

Pastoral Message for the Archdiocese of Lingayen Dagupan  
on  
Celebrating Masses without the People

I have been often asked by friends and some of you, “When is my most memorable and happiest day as a priest?” and I have replied “Everyday”. Indeed it is.

These past days, I have been going through my most painful and my most agonizing days as a priest and bishop. The threat of a fast spreading virus that can kill easily now obliges me to offer the Mass physically segregated from you.

What makes the pain even more excruciating is to have to mandate my brother priests to offer the Masses without the congregation as part of our social moral responsibility to the Church, to the country and to the world. This is painful.

No epidemic can stop us your priests from praying for you my beloved people. You will not be able to join us physically in the Masses we shall offer these next weeks. But believe in your mind and deep in your soul that in every Mass we, your priests, celebrate away from you, you our dear people are mystically in attendance. From your homes with your families and from our parish churches, we are one in the mystical love of the Lord. When we look up we see the same sky and adore the same Creator. When we bow down wherever we may be, we touch the same God who dwells in our hearts.

My tears flow. My heart bleeds as we go through this painful days offering Mass without your personal presence.

There is a day in the Church’s life when we do not celebrate the sacraments and offer the Mass. It is on Black Saturday. We are unable to receive Holy Communion on Black Saturday as we keep silent vigil over the tomb on which the Lord was laid. Let the void hurt. Let it speak. Let it sting.

In this season of Lent we are now invited to observe a long Black Saturday to keep vigil, trusting that beyond this physical distance and emptiness, a moment of glory awaits us. We will stay home and receive the Lord spiritually as our sacrifice during this extended Black Saturday. Do not take receiving Holy Communion for granted again.

This is a blessed time to learn silence again as the true language of love. May we learn again that true love does not wither with distance, but is actually strengthened by it. May we learn anew that love grows best when boundaries are respected; that distance need not mean indifference; that love actually needs distance to grow. Perhaps this is a good chance to see how sacramentalized our Catholicism has become through the centuries; how our faith has been mostly expressed through pious cultural traditions. We have a chance to recover the practice of ascetical discipline and family rosary; to return to the primacy of charity for the poor; the call for social engagement; for priests to be mystics not managers.

We implore the Lord that as we make this fasting from the liturgy and from receiving Him in the Holy Sacrament, He may find our sacrifice pleasing so that the sins of the world may be forgiven, the spread of this plague may cease and the world may live again in health and true peace.

Although you will be unable to receive the Lord sacramentally these days, we must be mindful always of the poor daily wage earners who might not have enough livelihood as a result of the quarantine. As Christian neighbors, let us share food and hygiene kits, including vitamins and medicines to those who have been rendered jobless by this social situation or the aged who are home bound or bedridden. Do not wait to have extra to give to the poor. If we are true Christians, care for the poor is topmost. We are all poor before God and He has loved us and made us rich in love; that is why we must share.

This pain will pass. The Lord will fill our void with His joy. I believe.

We are reduced, O Lord, beyond any other nation, brought low everywhere in the world this day because of our sins. We have in our day no prince, prophet, or leader, no burnt offering, sacrifice, oblation, or incense, no place to offer first fruits, to find favor with you. But with contrite heart and humble spirit let us be received. As though it were burnt offerings of rams and bulls, or tens of thousands of fat lambs, so let our sacrifice be in your presence today and find favor before you; for those who trust in you cannot be put to shame. (Daniel 3:37-40)