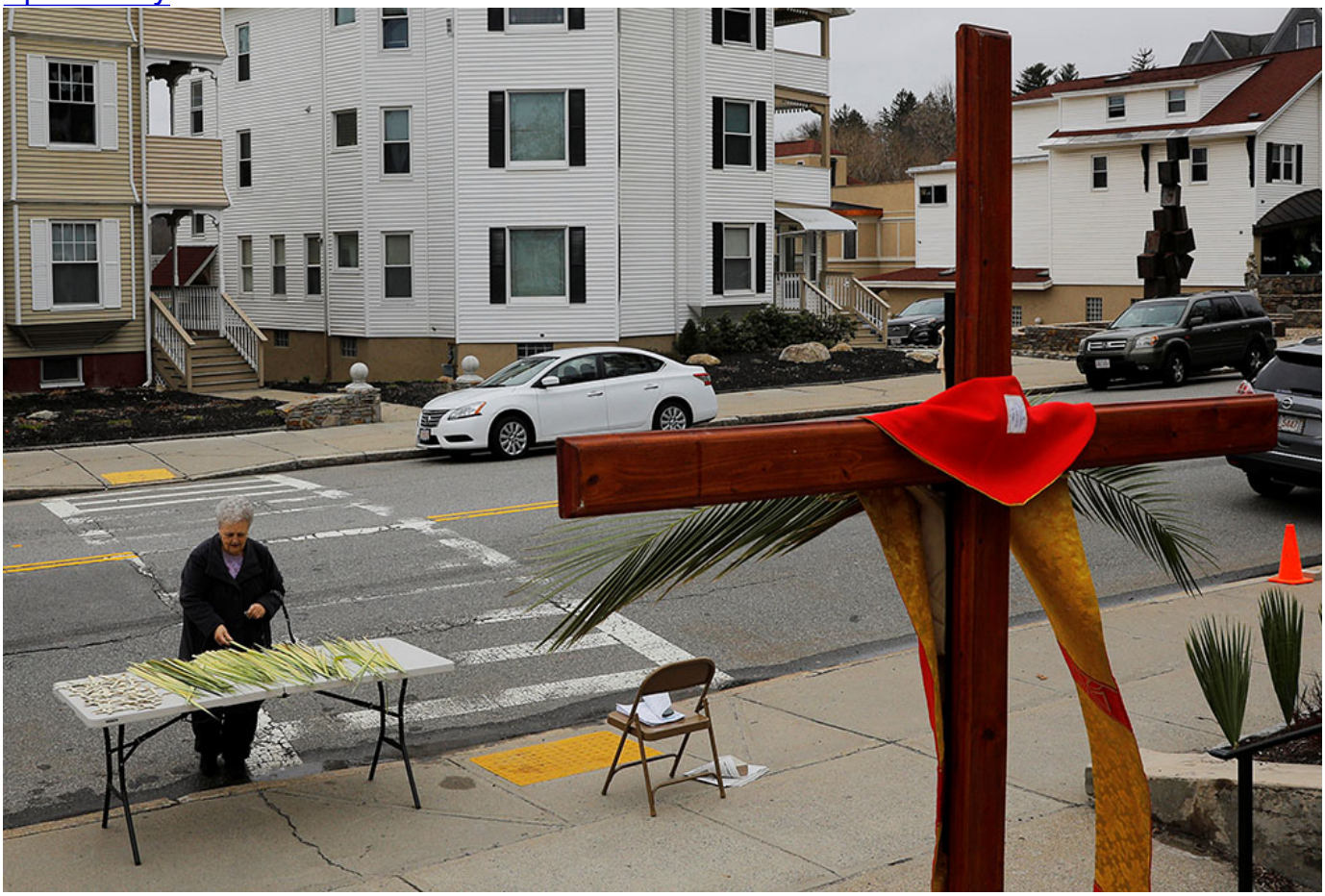
Spirituality



A parishioner in Worcester, Massachusetts, picks up palms April 5 outside Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church on Palm Sunday during the coronavirus pandemic. (CNS / Reuters / Brian Snyder)



by Dan Stockman

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This week is the most important week in Christianity, a series of holy days that together tell the Christian account of the human race: hope and promise followed by betrayal, separation, death and — finally — resurrection.

It is a time when Christians gather to celebrate the holy mysteries of salvation. But this year, we will have to do it separately. Socially distant. Quarantined, like the disciples hiding behind locked doors for fear of what awaited them outside.

For Catholic women religious, not being able to join their sisters in Holy Week observations is almost unimaginable. But it was also unimaginable to Jesus' followers that he would be arrested, tried and publicly executed. And just as they always do, sisters have responded to the needs of the time with creativity and compassion.

What follows is a sampling of how sisters around the world are observing Holy Week in a time when mass gatherings are prohibited and social distancing is the new normal.

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"Eucharistic celebration is very dear to the heart of my community, though this situation has made it impossible for us to be physically present at Mass," Sr. Teresa Anyabuike, a Sister of Notre Dame de Namur living in Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria, told Global Sisters Report in an email. "We never anticipated that there will be a time we will not join in the celebration of the Holy Week and Easter physically with other faithful. We hold everyone in our hearts in our daily prayers. We are socially and emotionally present to each other in this pandemic, realizing that we are all in this together."

The community will celebrate as it is able in its chapel and join televised liturgies.

"This reality has given us the opportunity to reflect and see God more in the situation. Most of the sisters who go out for ministry now work online and find creative ways to reach out to people," Anyabuike wrote. "We join the Church in praying for the end of the virus and pray the rosary every evening."

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For some communities, prayer has become the bedrock of daily life.

"Our Life of prayer has taken a special rhythm and is becoming more and more all embracing," Sr. Teresa Joseph, a Salesian Sister in Mumbai, India, wrote in an email to GSR. "Mixed feelings of acute pain and great hope fill my being as I write this: pain for our brothers and sisters who are suffering, hope because I am certain that nothing is impossible with the Lord."

She has found particular comfort in celebrating daily Mass online with Cardinal Oswald Gracias, and the Easter Masses will be celebrated via television broadcast.

"This particular experience will certainly help to strengthen our faith in the Risen Lord," Joseph wrote. "For with Jesus at our right hand can the Coronavirus shake us? Oh no. Listen to the voice of the Risen Lord: 'Fear not I am with you.' "



Ursuline sisters in Kansas watch a Facebook Live stream of Palm Sunday Mass celebrated at the motherhouse of the Ursuline Sisters of Mount St. Joseph, Kentucky, April 5. (GSR photo / Michele Morek)

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"No one could know that the Lenten journey this year would take us into a very real wilderness," Sr. Karlyn Cauley, a Sister of the Divine Savior in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, wrote in an email to GSR. "Right now there is self-quarantine for nearly all activities where I live in an apartment building for 60 elderly African Americans in the midst of an impoverished neighborhood in the central city."

Cauley has found the beliefs of her neighbors have given her new insights.

"I reflect on scriptural wilderness and have heard the residents' strong belief as Baptist Christians in the importance of the Exodus on their behalf," she wrote. "The self-quarantine is a form of imprisonment for the sake of the whole community and I am absorbing their deep belief in God's Providence no matter what happens. Those with whom I am living feel they are 'borne up' on eagle's wings and that image helps me a great deal. ... Their dispositions show me God's face in these challenges."

The Sisters of the Divine Savior will livestream Holy Week services to their sisters around the world, some of whom are stuck in foreign countries by travel restrictions.

"We will sing our solos for familiar hymns and we are sure we are in unity and communion across the distances," Cauley wrote. "Everything in our lives and mission has prepared us for this time, have formed us to be followers on the way to Jerusalem and to resurrection. ... The lessons of this time will continue to be revealed!"



A young woman goes to confession April 1 at a window outside St. Anthony's Catholic Church in North Beach, Maryland, during the coronavirus pandemic. (CNS / Bob Roller)

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For the Sisters of St. Benedict of St. Mary Monastery in Rock Island, Illinois, the Holy Week observances will be in many ways the same as always, but also very different.

The sisters will be able to gather in the chapel for liturgies, but the monastery is closed to visitors, so no priest will be present.

"Because of the absence of a priest we will adapt the normal liturgies," Sr. Sandra Brunenn, the community's prioress, wrote in a memo to sisters. "We will, though, have active participation of all and sing our hearts out!"

The sisters have been practicing social distancing in the dining room, the community room and the chapel, and liturgies are being adapted for social distancing: Palm

Sunday had no procession and the sister who passed out palms wore gloves. There will be no washing of the feet on Holy Thursday.

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At the Fatima Virgin Mary community in Vietnam, seven Dominican Missionary Sisters of Phu Cuong and the 30 orphans they care for are stuck inside and unable to hold daily Mass.

Even though there is no Mass, Sr. Mary Nguyen Thi Phuong Lan told GSR in an email, the children and sisters still gather in the chapel to pray for victims of the pandemic. The sisters also pray for God's mercy for an hour at 3 p.m. every day and for healing those who are sick at Adoration in the evening. Holy Week observances will be live-streamed from the Saigon cathedral.

"Having no daily Mass, we must increase more praying hours for the global world, the nation, congregation, family, friends, and ourselves," Nguyen wrote. "Maybe, through this coronavirus pandemic, we will really experience that we are closer to God, because He is our strength and protection, an ever-present aid in affliction."



A priest celebrates Mass on April 2 at a church in Herk-de-Stad, Belgium. (CNS / Reuters / Yves Herman)

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The Sisters of Providence of St. Vincent de Paul in Kingston, Ontario, share their home with two other religious communities: the Congregation of Notre Dame and the Religious Hospitallers of St. Joseph.

"Our 2020 Lenten journey took on a very different meaning than any of us anticipated as we gathered for the Ash Wednesday Liturgy," Providence Sr. Lucy Bethel, director of the Providence Spirituality Centre, wrote in an email to GSR.

The community had planned to observe Holy Week with modifications — only the presider receiving Communion, no washing of the feet on Holy Thursday, and no touching or kissing of the cross at Good Friday veneration — but on March 30, the Ontario government banned gatherings of more than five people. All sisters will now participate in the liturgies from their place of residence via closed-circuit television.

Bethel wrote that she finds comfort in the words of Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*: "We are not disconnected from the rest of creatures, but joined in a splendid universal communion. As believers, we do not look at the world from without but from within, conscious of the bonds with which the Father has linked us to all beings."

"I sense that in this moment our call is to be attentive to our interconnectedness with one another and all our brothers and sisters throughout the world," she wrote.

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Sr. Frances Hayes, a member of the Congregation of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary living in Samson, Western Australia, wrote in an email to GSR that she is unsure how her community will observe Holy Week because plans change daily to meet the current needs.

But she is sure she and the other sisters will have new appreciation for what Jesus, Mary and the disciples experienced: The community recently lost a sister, but only her five siblings, four Presentation sisters and the archbishop could be present for

the funeral. Hayes used to regularly visit elderly sisters receiving full-time care but now cannot. Only those living in the motherhouse can attend Mass there.

"I doubt there will be any significant celebration of Easter other than that we will all be united with each other somehow, experiencing a little of the suffering of Jesus and the aloneness of Mary and the apostles," she wrote.

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For the Missionary Benedictine Sisters serving in Manila, the Philippines, the only difference in Holy Week will be the lack of laypeople: The community has a resident priest who is allowed to celebrate Mass every day.

"The difference is that only we sisters can attend the Mass," Sr. Mary John Mananzan, former prioress and now the vice president for external affairs at St. Scholastica's College, wrote in an email to GSR. "The lay people who usually come to Mass are in quarantine."

The community has also increased its prayer life.

"For the intention of fighting the virus, we have daily rosary, adoration, and fasting every Tuesday and Friday," Mananzan wrote. "We have also begun a short centering prayer where we visualize the virus being driven into the sea from our islands and drowning there (just like the pigs that the devil possessed and plunged themselves into the sea in the Gospel)."

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A man wearing a protective mask carries a crucifix April 5 in Oviedo, Spain, on Palm Sunday. (CNS / Reuters / Eloy Alonso)

Sr. Carmen Notario and Sr. Magda Bennásar, both Sisters for Christian Community living in Spain, are offering an online Easter Triduum retreat. The sisters offered the online retreat last year and had almost 4,000 participants despite little notice.

The retreat is especially useful, Bennásar wrote in an email to GSR, because people can use the reflections and prayer moments at their own time and place.

"This year, imagine how we feel about the millions of people searching for 'refugia' or 'domestic monasteries' from where to experience God and community through the lenses of Jesus' passion and resurrection," she wrote. "Here, from where we write, Spain, we cannot even go out for a walk — the confinement is total and harsh, and especially difficult [when] bombarded continuously by the media with the number of infected, the number of deaths. We need a 'refugia' where we know God communicates to us through silence and community — more so on these special days."

Join the online retreats in English or in Spanish. Two reflections will be posted each day, one including the evangelical vows and another for a broader audience, Thursday through Sunday.

The Carmelite Sisters of Zimbabwe celebrate Palm Sunday on April 5, 2020, amid the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic. (Provided video)

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