

Praying at home during this Coronavirus Holy Week

A theologian offers a practical way for Catholics to celebrate the most important liturgical events of the Christian faith

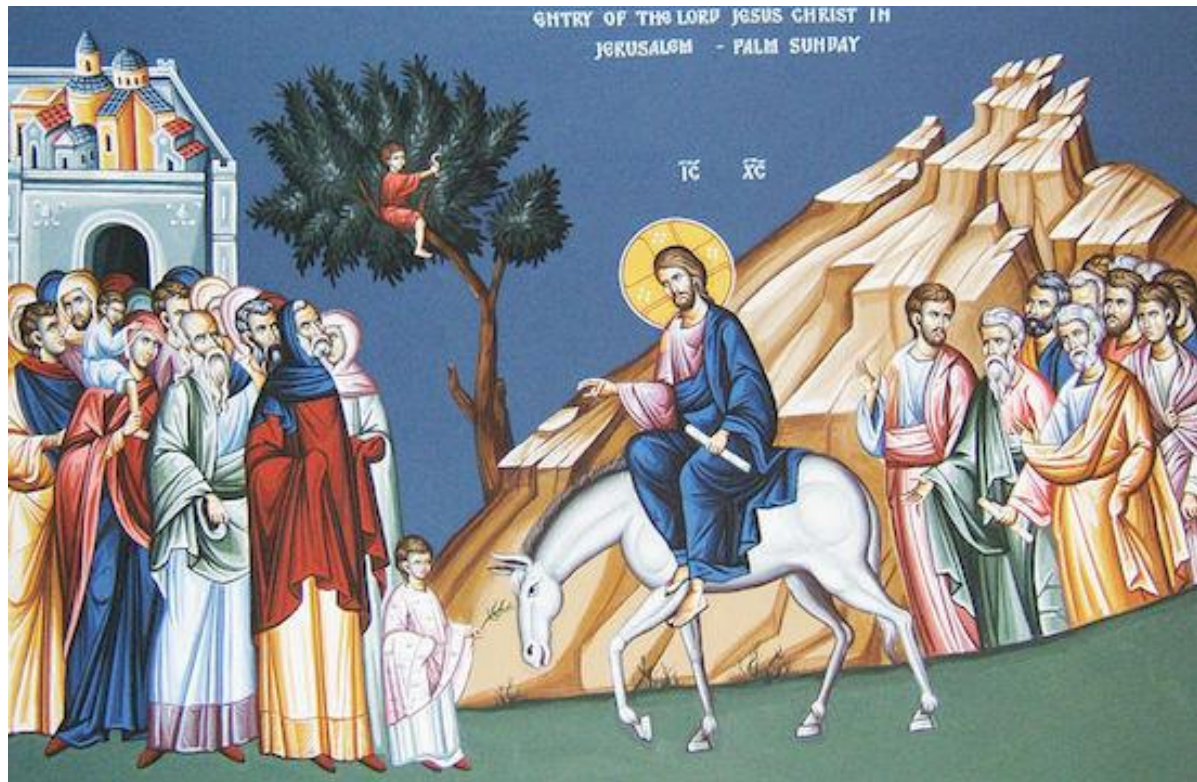
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You can divide religions into two categories: those most at home in a large public space and those most at home in the domestic space.

Most contemporary Christians, at least in the West, know only the former. They own many big buildings – and that is where religion takes place.

If it takes place elsewhere, that is really just "a follow up". Christians seem to like big public statements.

But it is startling to recall that the original Eucharistic meals – where the followers of Jesus distinguished themselves from their fellow Jews – took place in their homes.

"Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke the loaf at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts" (Acts 2, 46).

In this domestic setting, they were in tune with their Jewish roots.

Every meal was to be an occasion at which those gathered blessed God (Dt 8, 10); the weekly meal with which the Sabbath began was a special act of praise, and the most special night of the year is the Passover meal when God's liberating deeds are recalled around the table.

This year – in most places – Christians are going to have to rediscover this domestic liturgical space.

Let us remind ourselves of some basics.

1. *Jesus is present with us*

The risen Jesus is present in every community, however small. This was captured in a saying that's preserved in Matthew's gospel: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Mt 18, 20).

Even the smallest gathering – just two people staying two meters apart so as not to spread the virus – has the Risen Lord is among them.

This might be two people in a house, or it might be people linked on the phone or on Skype.

This was expressed in another ancient Christian saying – preserved in the *Didache* (a first-century new disciples' guide): "Wherever the things of the Lord are spoken about, there the Lord is present" (4:1).

2. *Our sitting room is a place of prayer*

We might be feeling the lack of a church building, but recall this instruction by Jesus:

"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the gatherings and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (Mt 6, 5-6).

3. *Center and summit*

Our prayer together at home should be seen as being among the foothill: soon we shall gather as a whole community again for the Great Thanksgiving that we call "the Eucharist".

4. *Every table is a sacred place*

Jesus encountered people and taught at their tables: every table is a place where we can encounter the Lord in those with us.

We will not be eating together as sisters and brothers in a church for the next few weeks, so let's starting recalling that whenever we eat, we should be thankful.

We can gather at the table now to celebrate Holy Week, and there in our domestic space, enter Jerusalem with Jesus, recall his last Supper with his disciples on Thursday, rejoice in his victory over sin and death when he was exalted upon the Cross on Good Friday, wait for him during the still hours of Saturday, and sing our Easter "alleluia" at that same table next Sunday.

Getting going

If you want to devise a special liturgy to celebrate Palm Sunday, even with with those locked down in the same house with you, then that itself will be an act of praise.

But if you want a little "ready made" liturgy that can just be downloaded, then here is one.

Remember – a home liturgy has to be:

- simple and short (the kettle may be boiling or a phone start ringing) – this one takes about 6 minutes;
- it has to be straight-forward (people, not just children, must not get a fit of the giggles: *what works in a big group will often not work in a very small group*); and
- you do not need lots of words to pray, remember, and celebrate.

Lots of people have helped create this little liturgy – thanks to them all!

Thomas O'Loughlin is a priest of the Catholic Diocese of Arundel and Brighton and professor of historical theology at the University of Nottingham (UK). His latest book is Eating Together, Becoming One: Taking Up Pope Francis's Call to Theologians (Liturgical Press, 2019).

A Home Liturgy for Palm Sunday 2020

If you have a garden and can get some greenery, then get enough to give a piece to each person in isolation with you.

If you cannot cut some greenery but have a potted plant, place that on the table – it will remind you and anyone with you of the strange year we are in.

Sit down around the table you are normally at for meals. If you do not have such a common table, then sit around where you normally eat.

Sisters and brothers, this Sunday we gather as individual households or alone in our homes. In all instances God is with us, the Christ is among us, and the Church is at prayer. This prayer resource is for you this Sunday.

Opening

Have a piece of greenery in your hand

Leader or together:

Sisters and Brothers, we have observed the 40 days of Lent. We unite ourselves to the Church Universal and pray that we may enter this Holiest of Weeks with reverence and hope.

We pray: God of all creation, these branches recall for us the joy of that day when Jesus, fulfilling the scriptures, made his entry into Jerusalem. Bless this greenery we hold in our hands that it may go with us throughout the coming year.

All: Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.

Reader: (Matthew 21:1-11).

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew.

When Jesus and the disciples drew near Jerusalem
and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives,
Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them,
"Go into the village opposite you,
and immediately you will find an ass tethered,
and a colt with her.

Untie them and bring them here to me.

And if anyone should say anything to you, reply,

'The master has need of them.'

Then he will send them at once."

This happened so that what had been spoken through the prophet
might be fulfilled:

Say to daughter Zion,

"Behold, your king comes to you,

mEEK and riding on an ass,

and on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden."

The disciples went and did as Jesus had ordered them.

They brought the ass and the colt and laid their cloaks over them,
and he sat upon them.

The very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road,

while others cut branches from the trees
and scattered them on the road.

The crowds going ahead of him and those following
kept crying out and saying:

"Hosanna to the Son of David;
blessed is the he who comes in the name of the Lord;
hosanna in the highest."

And when he entered Jerusalem
the whole city was shaken and asked, "Who is this?"
And the crowds replied,
"This is Jesus the prophet, from Nazareth in Galilee."
The Gospel of the Lord.

All: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Then together say:

O Gates lift high your heads;

Grow higher ancient doors.

Let him enter the King of Glory!

Who is the King of Glory?

He, the Lord of Host, he is the King of Glory.

Spend a minutes in silence thinking about the Gospel. Then talk together about what Jesus will do in Jerusalem in the coming days. What will happen on Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday? Remind one another that Jesus is present in this domestic liturgy: 'for where two or three have gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them' (Mt 18:20).

Prayer of the Faithful

Leader: Let us pray.

Let each in turn lead an intercession:

We pray for all those infected by the Coronavirus around the world, for those who care for them, for health specialists and authorities who are combating the spread of infection, and for all who at this time are feeling anxious.

Lord hear us.

For all believers: that we take up the cross each day and remain faithful to the Lord.

Lord hear us.

For world leaders: that they may govern with mercy, justice and respect for the rights of all people for just treatment, food, water, shelter and safety. Lord hear us.

For wealthy nations and people; that they act with compassion and concern for the poor and marginalized.

Lord hear us.

Make your own prayers for those who are sick or in need. Ask God to protect them.

Finish each prayer with:

Lord, hear us.

Then the leader says:

We pray for those who have died that they may rest in the loving presence of the Lord.

Lord hear us.

And now let us pray together as Jesus taught us:

Everyone prays this together:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.

Leader: May God bless us and keep us safe.

All: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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Celebrating together during the crisis

Despite imposed isolation in times of pandemic, there is an ancient way for Christians to gather as one in prayer

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"Lockdown" has gone from being a phrase only heard on news bulletins after shooting incidents in the United States to being the description that millions of us give to our lives right now.

We cannot gather for liturgy in large groups, we cannot gather in small informal groups physically close to each other, and more and more of us are confined to our own homes.

So can we pray together? Can we celebrate as the Church?

In some places this seems not to be a problem. The local priest or bishop has gone and got some technology, told people to watch on TV or computer, and then 'said Mass' – and many are delighted and see little problem!

Some bishops have even gone a step further and dug out a dusty 17th-century justification once used to explain why almost no one 'went to communion' to suggest that you might not be losing that much! You could, after all have 'spiritual communion'!

But this notion, grabbed out of the cupboard in a hurry, fails to take account of the incarnational – that is, the actual touching, tasting, feeling – nature of Christianity and does not do justice to what we believe about the importance of the Eucharist.

In any case, as some cynic pointed out, if you can have 'spiritual communion' why can't the collection also be spiritual: I would like to give some money, but I only have to think about it!

Pater NOSTER: Praying as a group

But this virus could bring us a blessing: we might re-discover praying not just with those around us – if we are in a house or flat with others – but our sense of being the whole People of God at prayer.

Most of us live very private lives and we think of prayer as the most private activity of all. Prayer often becomes 'me' and 'about me' and 'for me.'

But look again that the Lord's Prayer – it all about US, it is WE who prayer, and we ask for OUR needs.

Go through the prayer noticing that the singular individual (I/me) is completely absent, and it is framed entirely in the plural (our/us).

We pray:

OUR Father who art in heaven ...

Give US this day OUR daily bread, and

Forgive US OUR trespasses

As WE forgive those who trespass against US

And lead US not into temptation, but deliver US ...

Just think how different it would be if you said: "give me my daily bread"! It would be little more than an expression of selfishness, as if society did not exist. It would be the religious parallel of panic buying.

The early followers of Jesus did not think of themselves as praying individuals – even when they were alone – but as a single group, this new single social reality gathered into one by the Christ who as one family, brothers and sisters of Jesus (Mt 12:50), addressed God.

We have forgotten this, and it is time to recover it.

Praying at the times of prayer in the temple

By the time of Jesus it was common knowledge among the Jews that they prayed as one people in God's temple in Jerusalem. If they wished to show their earnestness in prayer that were expected to align their times of prayer with those of the sacrifices of praise in that temple.

So in the little novelette, the Book of Judith, this woman (presented as an ideal of holiness) who has to save her people, gives added force to her prayer by fasting and by praying at the exact moment the evening prayer was being offered in Jerusalem (Judith 9:1).

The regular pattern of prayer emphasized the natural moments of each day – dawn/morning; noon/midday; and dusk/evening. It linked Israel to God and bound each individual into the People.

The first followers of Jesus adopted this theme of praying together in their memorized instruction guide for disciples, the Didache:

"You should pray like this, just as the Lord commanded in his gospel:

Our Father, who is in the heaven

Hallowed be your name

Your kingdom come

Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven

Give us this day our daily bread

And forgive us our debt as we forgive our debtors

And do not abandon us in the day of trial

But deliver us from the evil one

For yours is the power and glory forever.

Say this prayer three times each day (Did 8: 1-3).

The Didache does not say when each day, but the obvious meaning is morning, midday and evening.

However, the more important point for us to remember is that whether those disciples were alone or in company, when they said the prayer, they thought of themselves as a group.

By the way, it would be 1000 years later before anyone had the idea that one could pray without moving one's lips. People of former times may have prayed very quietly, but our notion of just letting the mind run over ideas would have seemed weird to them.

The prayer of fixed times

The notion of group prayer – even when scattered – can be found in Judaism. There is the desire to know the exact moment when Shabbat begins, as way to link all Jewish households where God will be blessed.

It is also found in Islam. Muslims pray five times each day, linking them to fellow believers in praying how great God is.

And it is found in Christianity with the Liturgy of the Hours. There is the notion that, as one group's praise ends, the song of the whole people is taken up by another member of this body.

But for most Christians this practice has been forgotten. The prayer of the hours has been "outsourced" to some monks or nuns or a few pious individuals.

This is a great pity. It means we've lost something that can bind us together in the face of the lonely individualism that is symptomatic of consumerist society.

And it also dulls our awareness that the prayer of blessing the Creator binds us with Jews and Muslims.

Just reflect on the sweep of this this 19th century hymn by John Ellerton:

The day thou gavest Lord is ended
The darkness falls at thy behest
To thee our morning hymns ascended
Thy praise with sanctify our rest
We thank thee that thy Church unsleeping
While earth rolls onwards into light
Through all the world her watch is keeping
And rest not now by day or night ...
Find this hymn and read it, pray it!

So what can WE do?

I know people who are using Zoom to set up groups to celebrate the Liturgy of the Hours. Great! This is a real community praying the Church's prayer.

In normal times, rushing to get the kids out to school or running to get ready for work, this would not be possible. But now it is, and for that we can be thankful. As for the text, you do not need to buy a book – that too is on the web!

I hear of other groups who are using parts of the Liturgy of the Hours because, let's face it, if you are not used to all those psalms and readings, it can give you biblical indigestion.

But even that is too much for many people and they may not want to have to go to the bother of linking up on-line. Well, just follow that first-century instruction: pray the Our Father, actually saying it quietly or aloud, three times (morning, midday, evening) each day in union with the rest of US who call on God as Father.

We should also note another aspect of our humanity.

Many people, for the first time in their lives, are living without the normal external pressures that organize their day and create a routine. We need routines if we are not to go crazy, especially when confined within four walls.

Monks and nuns have known this for centuries. And one of the ways that they impose order on their lives is to link times of prayer to the structure of the day:

darkness/light, the morning time of getting up, the middle of the day and work, and the evening and slowing down.

So attune to this rhythm, and then link yourself to it and to others by having times of prayer. It does not have to be elaborate, it does not need many words, but it does need regularity and attention.

An On-line Mass is always just a substitute, an ersatz. It's a poor second to the real thing.

Let's not cheapen it: let us wait until we can again rejoice, elbow-to-elbow around the table of the Lord, give each other the kiss of peace, and share the loaf and drink again from the Lord's cup.

During lockdown, let's do something spiritual, immediate and real. Pray each day in union with all our sisters and brothers wherever they are in our need.

As over continent and island

The dawn leads on another day

The voice of prayer is never silent

Nor dies the strain of praise away!

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