

Facing challenges opens us up to hope

As Christians, we have been on our Lenten journey since Ash Wednesday. This year, it is a journey with unique challenges.

Did you know that March 22 was the Fourth Sunday of Lent, traditionally referred to as Laetare or Rejoice Sunday? The priest would wear rose-coloured vestments and the areas around the altar would be decorated with flowers. On Rejoice Sunday, we are “joyful in Jesus who reconciles us to God.”

But we didn’t celebrate community Mass on Rejoice Sunday. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government declared a health emergency and the Archdiocese of Toronto cancelled all public Masses and other liturgical celebrations.

Even though priests have been celebrating Mass every day privately, on this Rejoice Sunday, I missed the responses from the congregation — I felt an absence of joy. I really missed the congregation.

We are rightly concerned with the effects of the pandemic. We may be feeling anxious, worried or afraid. We may be concerned about our jobs, our finances, children’s education and our parishes. We may be concerned about our families, friends and co-workers. But now is the time to learn to listen to scientists, health experts and government officials who are working hard to keep us healthy.

We all need to remain calm and focus on our call to be responsible in doing our part in fighting the spread of the virus. This is about life and as Christians it is our obligation to be vigilant.

So the question is: As people of



George and Randa Sabat and their four children pray at home during the coronavirus lockdown of Bethlehem. Family prayer is just one spiritual exercise to enhance this Lenten journey, says Fr. Yaw Acheampong. (CNS photo/courtesy Sabat family)



FR. YAW ACHEAMPONG

faith, how can we practise our faith in this challenging time? How does this sudden change of events affect our spiritual life in Lent?

Usually at this time, parishes would be involved in several activities: preparing children to celebrate the sacraments, instructing catechumens for them to be baptized or received in the Church at the Easter Vigil celebration and celebrating Reconciliation. From the Fifth Sunday of Lent we veil crucifixes, statues and images in the churches.

Each of these rituals and celebrations, including Palm

Sunday, Holy Week and the Easter Triduum, serve as markers on our Lenten journey. These markers strengthen our spirits.

Parishes have ordered their palms and the Easter candles for their parishioners. But we may not be seeing the palms and the candles, or celebrate these events together. However, in order to spiritually grow and to strengthen our spirit, we need to continue to focus on our Lenten journey. We need to be creative. We can try something that we don’t normally do.

For example, we can read a complete book in the Bible. This is also a wonderful opportunity for parents/guardians to offer their gift of time to help their children review the lessons in preparation to celebrate the sacraments. We can also do some acts of charity at home and for our neighbour by reaching out to those who may need help. We should remember that the goodness and the compassion of God is made real and present in the way we show

patience, and in the way we care for and support each other.

To many of us, this is the first time we are experiencing what Cardinal Thomas Collins has referred to as “spiritual suffering.” Many of our Christian brothers and sisters are deprived of the opportunity of celebrating the Eucharist for several reasons. Now our churches are closed even for private prayer and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. But we can watch TV Mass. We may share in the “spiritual suffering” of our brothers and sisters as part of the Lenten journey.

Prayer is an important spiritual exercise, particularly in Lent. We can pray the rosary and the popular Lenten prayer — the Stations of the Cross — with our children at home. The Bible tells us about men and women who prayed during challenging times: Abraham (Genesis 18), Moses (Exodus 37), Hannah (1 Sam. 1) and Esther (Esther 14) and Azariah (Dan. 3). Even Jesus Himself prayed to God for courage before His passion (Matt. 26). Praying offers us a sacred space to help us to be calm, find peace and help us surrender ourselves to the mercy and the goodness of God.

As Christians we know our Lenten journey is moving towards the celebration of the Passion and death of Jesus. Our Lenten journey will end at the celebration of Resurrection of Jesus on Easter Sunday. This is our faith, and our faith in God gives us a reason to hope for a better tomorrow.

Through the intercession of our Blessed Mother, St. Joseph, St. Michael and all the saints, may God grant us strength, courage and protection. Be safe.

(Fr. Acheampong is pastor at Our Lady of Peace Parish in Toronto.)

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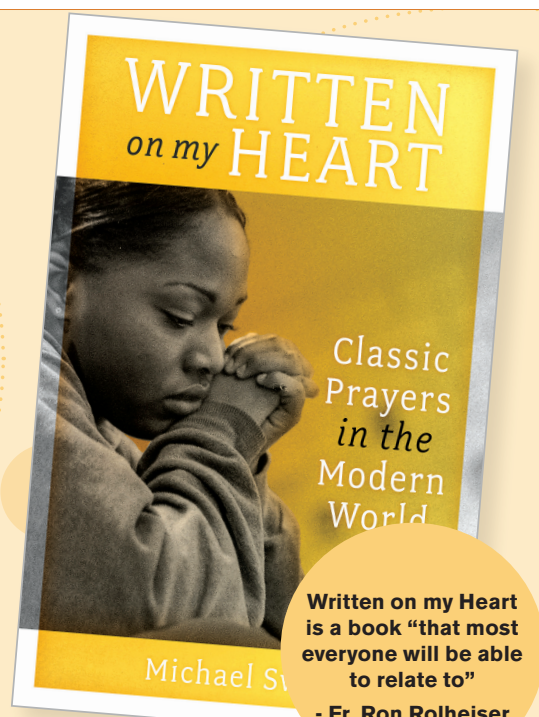
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