

Dear brothers and sisters,

I would like to wish everybody a blessed Holy Week.

By the Power of the Holy Spirit, may we enter deeply into the Mystery of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

May the same Spirit make us one with our Lord and with each other.

I believe this is the first time that we don't have the possibility to go to our churches to celebrate the most important liturgy of the year. Definitely it is the first time for me.

The Archbishop invited us to join him on the Internet in the celebration of the Easter Triduum, which means Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday (the Easter Vigil). It will be a good way to be united in spirit, supporting him and each other in this time of struggle.

I am grateful for that and I invite all those who can, to be part of it.

Unfortunately, many won't be able to participate because they don't have a computer, or they do not know how to use it. This is a good reason to be grateful, and also to join in. Let us bring them with us in our hearts and souls, so that God's Grace may be bestowed upon them through the intercession of our prayers.

What is Grace? Grace is the same God Who pours Himself within our souls, completely freely and for free, without us deserving it or being able to earn it, only out of His Infinite Love and Mercy.

I want to share with you my own struggle as a priest. It makes me sad not to be able to celebrate with you or to be able to meet and serve you in person.

Don't take me wrong, I am happy to have more time to be with the Franciscan brothers and to reach out through the Masses that we celebrate together as brothers at the convent, and that we post on YouTube; and I am also happy that we will join together with our Archbishop for these next days of celebration. But

still, something so essential is missing: the human presence in body and soul of all of us, brothers and sisters; all of you whom I have been called to serve with love.

I remember few years ago, when I was elected moderator of the Franciscans of Halifax for four years, before Fr Pio was elected. Before that I was assistant pastor for five years in a parish in Truro. I loved being and serving the people. After the election my work was happening mainly in an office.

When I came back to Halifax to begin my new ministry, I started to celebrate mass by myself at the convent and I didn't have opportunities to meet and minister to people. It was one of the most awful experiences of my life!

My heart was overtaken by an overwhelming struggle, by a deep and piercing sense of void within myself, maybe like a father separated from his children, or like a groom separated from his bride. I do not know how to describe it.

I remember that I asked Fr James Wegner, who at that time was pastor in St Theresa's and St Catherine's, to celebrate mass together with him and the people. He was kind and welcoming, and immediately he invited me. Then with time I started to reach out to people as a priest in any way I could, doing my best to balance my duties as superior of the Franciscans with at least a minimum of pastoral service. Joy came back to my heart.

In these days, too, a lot is missing in my life as a priest. I still have the chance to be close to so many people, but I do pray that the Lord will set us free soon from this sickness and that this will be the last time that we will be asked to be separated from each other, especially at Easter. I look forward to the moment when we will be all together again, very eagerly.

I share this with you in solidarity with many other priests, good and loving shepherds, who are struggling in the same way and cannot wait to be again with their flocks.

Easter is such an amazing Mystery and the liturgy is so rich to help us to enter into it.

In particular I would like to point our attention toward the fact that lately we have been journeying through the Gospel in a wonderful way, preparing ourselves for the celebration of Easter, the Mystery of our Salvation.

In these past Sundays we read the pages of the Gospel that relate about Jesus meeting and converting the Samaritan woman at the well, healing a man born blind, and bringing His friend Lazarus back from the dead.

In those readings we walked on the path of the Disciples of Christ, who are converted, whose eyes are opened, and whose life is restored, through the Sacrament of Baptism. This is our own story, our own path.

Following the story told by the Gospel, on the Saturday before Palm Sunday, we heard about the chief priests who decided to kill Jesus. They couldn't accept that the people believed in Him, especially because of the incredible miracle of the resurrection of Lazarus. They weren't able to discern in that sign that the gift of Life was given to humanity by God. Later on, they also decided to kill Lazarus because he was the living testimony of what Jesus did.

Those who imagined themselves as enemies of Christ, tragically ended up as enemies of Life.

On Palm Sunday we heard the account of the Passion, in preparation for Good Friday, but at the beginning of the liturgy we also heard the story of Jesus entering Jerusalem. Christ, the Messiah entered His city as a King, acclaimed by everybody who hoped in Him. In the same way Christ enters into our souls to carry out our burden of sin, accepting to pay the price for it in our stead, and to give us His own Life.

From the liturgy's point of view, Palm Sunday is the portal through which we are introduced into the celebration of Holy Week.

The liturgy of these days of Holy Week is so rich that it would be impossible to point out everything that is contained in it. Probably the best thing to do is just to allow ourselves to follow the celebrations and listen to the story told by the Gospel.

And yet I would like to bring to your attention three characters, only three, as described in the Gospel that is read on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of the Holy Week. Being part of a series of great events, sometimes they may remain unobserved; but I believe that they are amazing in the way that they can portrait what happens within our souls.

They are Mary, the woman who anointed Jesus' feet at Bethany, Peter, who declared himself ready to die with Jesus and who then denied Him three times, and Judas, who betrayed Jesus into the hands of His persecutors.

Mary represents our loving passion for Christ. She humbled herself in front of everybody pouring a costly perfumed ointment on Jesus' feet, and drying them with her hair. How many crazy things we can do for those we love, ignoring any judgment and criticism! How much our Faith in Jesus Christ would be made strong by that same passionate love, today!

Peter represent our good will to follow Christ through challenges and trials. He represents also our naivety and unpreparedness to distinguish our good thoughts from real life and its demands. Life is always able to surprise us and bring us to the point of having to choose between what is good, righteous, reasonable... on one side, and the poor love that is fruit of our weak heart, on the other side. God loves infinitely that poverty and that weakness in Mystery of His Mercy.

Judas represents our rejection of God's and our brothers and sisters' love. He is the one who closed his heart and stopped believing and hoping in Jesus Christ. Without Love there is no Faith; and without Faith there is no Hope. From the moment that Judas closed his heart, nothing made any more sense for him, and to him Jesus became an impostor, someone to be sold for a cheap price.

Our poor brother Judas! He was fooled by the devil, like Adam and Eve in the Garden, to think that his world should make sense outside of God's and Christ's Love.

Our Faith doesn't tell us if Judas at a last moment in his life repented and welcomed Christ's Salvation, or not. I hope that he did it, and I also pray that he did it, for the sake of the Salvation of his soul, but even more so because I myself have been Judas many times. I do hope for him, and in my weakness and sinfulness I do hope for myself.

Let us pray, my brothers and sisters, that God may touch our hearts and give us the strength to be weak, to accept and share God's Love, beyond what we think is good or evil.

I wish you all a wonderful Holy Easter. That the Risen Lord may bring Love, Faith and Hope into our hearts and souls!

Please be safe in this time of Easter. Remember that we are still called to be responsible for our health and the health of all. Maybe it will happen that we will have to be separated from our loved ones just for a time.

Let us be strong! We are following all these restrictions for ourselves and for them, too. Let us pray for them and we will see and hug them as soon as possible!

May the Risen Lord bless us all,

Fr Francesco