

Lent is a time to reflect on Jesus' journey, — the WAY to His crucifixion, death and resurrection. The Stations of the Cross, which Father Baker walks us through every Friday afternoon during Lent, describes Jesus' WAY to the Cross and His ultimate Crucifixion and Resurrection

Because we, the parishioners of St. Monica's, etc. have been separated by the Corona virus and are, therefore, unable to convene as a community in the church, I thought it might be helpful to look at each of the 14 Stations, think about the meaning of each and meditate or reflect on how each station might apply to our own lives presently.

As a bonus, beautiful portraits of 14 saints have been mounted beneath each station. Very briefly, I would like to comment on the possible relationship between the saint and the theme of the station as well as contemplate your personal responses to one or two relevant questions.

First, let's look at the titles of each of the stations:

- 1. Pilate condemns Jesus to die**
- 2. Jesus accepts his cross**
- 3. Jesus falls the first time**
- 4. Jesus meets his afflicted mother**
- 5. Simon helps Jesus carry the cross**
- 6. Veronica offers her veil to Jesus**
- 7. Jesus falls the second time**
- 8. Jesus speaks to the women**
- 9. Jesus falls the third time**

10. Jesus is stripped of his garments
11. Jesus is nailed to the cross
12. Jesus dies upon the cross
13. Jesus is taken down from the cross
14. Jesus is placed in the sepulcher

Now, let's look at ONE interpretation of each.

At Station One, Jesus is condemned to die. Visualize the scene. Jesus is standing alone. He has done nothing to deserve to die. Yet, the crowd jeers him, Peter denies knowing Him. The night before, in the garden of Gethsemane, he had asked the Father to remove this burden but quickly follows with an acceptance of God's will. His journey is about to begin. As with St. Augustine, the journey will be a bitter one; a prolonged one. However, unlike Jesus, Augustine's decision to accept conversion will not be instant. He will plead with God "to make him chaste, but not yet." To contemplate God's will more deeply, he will retreat to a garden. He will hear a child's voice imploring him to pick up and read a copy of Sacred Scripture. In this time of trial dealing with COVID-19, let us remember we are not alone. God is always with us. As we journey through the Stations of the Cross, know that Jesus is speaking to our restless hearts. During Lent, He has moved us from darkness to light, from sin to life, from feeling alone to the community of saints.

Reflection Questions: What are positive steps we can take right now to feel less alone? What do we learn from Augustine's story? How can the Word of God speak directly to our anxious hearts?

At Station Two, Jesus accepts and carries the cross. He knows this is part of God's plan to save mankind.

If we put ourselves in Jesus' shoes, we know that the pandemic that has befallen the world is a heavy cross to bear. However, it is not the fault of the people and God is not to blame. We must have faith and hope that the cross will become lighter. We ask God for strength as St. Francis of Assisi did. In the last two years of his life, Francis received the stigmata, the marks of the five physical wounds of Christ in his body. With these marks, Francis united with Jesus as a "man of sorrows" suffering in solidarity. As a young man, he observed soldiers being torn limb from limb in a devastating battle. COVID-19 has certainly provided the "dung" to unite the world, to ask the the world to carry the Cross for all mankind, to reflect on the fact that the wooden cross carried by Jesus represents us. Only if we share that weight will our weight lighten.

Reflection Questions: Francis mingled solidarity with the larger pain of the world with divine and human self-suffering. How can prayer and actions on our part lighten the present crisis facing us all?

At Station Three, Jesus falls for the first time. His frailty is visible for all to see. This was not the case with St. Teresa of

Calcutta who spent nearly a half century not feeling God's presence. While she presented a perpetually cheery public persona, she lived in a state of abiding spiritual pain as revealed in letters known as "dark letters." Yet, until her death, she continued to serve the most desperate and forlorn in India. Crushed under the cross of doubt that God existed yet, convinced of his abandonment, she kept going. Jesus, too, crushed by the weight of His cross gets up and moves forward while the crowd presses in on Him, shouting and displaying a lack of gratitude for His goodness. Afraid and discouraged by this Corona virus, we fall under the weight of uncertainty. Yet, we know — I know that I must pick myself up and go on. I ask God for mercy and resolve. Teresa of Calcutta certainly did.

Reflection Questions: There is so much to learn and know about COVID-19. How am I handling all the uncertainty the surrounds the virus? What constructive ways have I handled uncertainty in the past? Why do you think Teresa had such a hard time dealing with the presence of God? Have you experienced anything similar?

At Station Four, Mary, the mother of Jesus, comes face-to-face with her Son. He is covered in blood, sweat and spit, bent under the weight of that cross. She feels the sword pierce her soul. She offers Him what a mother can — the comfort of her presence. If we allow ourselves to encounter her image, what do we see? Do we see Mary's gaze filled with compassion and love? How is Jesus receiving her

gaze? How does this image remind us of “Our Lady of Perpetual Help?” In the icon, the Christ Child grasps his mother’s hand as though frightened by what he sees. he has become human like us ,only without sin. On Our Lady’s left and right we see reasons for the child’s fear. The vision of the instruments of the crucifixion has driven the boy Jesus to his mother’s protective embrace. Yet, Our Lady’s gaze is fixed on us, her children on earth. She is our source of constant comfort and hope.

Reflection Questions: How can we remain the constant source of comfort to our own children?

How are we distracting them from the grip of fear? How are we talking to them about what they see and hear happening in our world?

How can we demonstrate compassion for the suffering of others?

At Station Five, Jesus is helped by Simon of Cyrene to carry his cross. He is pressed into service and must detour from his plan of the day. He does so without complaint and he enters a life of service to God. He seems to appreciate this unexpected event in his life. For St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, the deaths of her husband, daughters and son were unexpected events in her life which led her to involve herself in life situations that she could not have anticipated. She converted to Catholicism, Through her friends, she saw faith in action. She opened the first free Catholic school in America,

founded the religious order of the Sisters of Charity, focused on education, children and the poor and established the first catholic orphanage in the country. For both Simon of Cyrene and Elizabeth Ann Seton, SERVICE TO THOSE WITH THE HIGHEST NEEDS, WAS PARAMOUNT.

Reflect on how first responders, gov't agencies, private companies, groups and individuals are responding to the COVID-19 crisis. In what ways can we give thanks to them who risk their lives for us? Reflect on the effects of Elizabeth Ann Seton's contributions to children, to the church and those in need.

At Station Six, Veronica (from the Latin and Greek meaning "true image") offers her veil to Jesus. She, about whom we know nothing, earns heaven with a simple gesture of charity.

This simple gesture represents risk and courage. She sees a face in pain and wants to help. She manages to touch Jesus's face tenderly. Legend has it that Christ's sweat, having left an imprint of his face on the cloth, transferred healing properties into its fabric. St. Michael, too, represents risk, courage, strength, and service. He is a protector of the Church. He is the top guardian angel. his name means "messenger of God." He is an angel, not human, yet a saint, because of his holiness. No matter how small the request, he performs small miracles with great love. At this station we are reminded that our acts of service — expected or not,

eagerly shared or not, obligatory or not — carry great weight in the kingdom of God.

Reflection Questions: In what small ways, can we open our hearts and mind to God and neighbor without being intrusive? How can we extend a gesture of charity? Have you called on St. Michael the Archangel lately?

At Stations Seven, Jesus falls a second time. Although he has accepted God's will, in his humanity, he stumbles as we do. Surrounded by rejection and scorn, anguish and fatigue, he rises a second time. He has the strength to go forward. He is unafraid of the difficulties ahead because at the end of his struggle is heaven. His fall represents self-sacrifice — an act of true humility which St. Patrick of Ireland also represented. Although a sinner, he accepted God's graciousness with gratitude. He resisted kudos, the lure of the favor of others. He was obedient to God wherever it led him. He demonstrated authentic humility, freeing himself of the need for pleasing others and being distracted from God's calling. He attributed his impact on Ireland to the grace, power, love and mercy of the one true God. May the humility of St. Patrick spread to those in the spotlight who wish to aggrandize themselves, inflate their egos and bore the public to death in these trying times.

Reflection Questions: How can we learn from our failures/our weaknesses? when we fall down?

What constructive steps can we take to keep us moving forward during this season of Lent?

How can we practice humility as St. Patrick did?

At Station Eight, Jesus speaks to a group of women of Jerusalem who are mourning and shedding tears for him. He stops and admonishes them gently but directly: “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and your children...” How can one interpret these words? One way, I believe is to attribute these tears to an overflow of emotion and piety at the particular moment without real thought to what comes next. Will these tears lead to a different outcome? Will the behaviors of these women change after the crucifixion has passed? There is no way of knowing. Only time and observable actions will tell. Maybe this is the reason Jesus is telling the ladies to look inward — don’t mourn for Him. He knows why he is doing what he is doing. In medieval legends, Mary Magdalene, another woman of the Bible, has looked inward. She has been redeemed by God because she has sinned. She leaves a life of sin behind and takes an action. She chooses to live in the wilderness for 30 years as a contemplative.

Today, COVID-19 gives us the perfect opportunity to look inward, to guard against trivializing the disease, to spreading the disease through careless behavior like holding COVID-19 parties and ignoring the command to distance ourselves socially. Let us not weep for Jesus but weep for a suffering world and, yes, even for ourselves.

Reflection Questions: In what ways are we contemplating our own behaviors? What actions are we taking to show gratitude to God for being safe? Following in the footsteps of Mary Magdalene, how are we thinking of life differently? What might a new life look like?

At Station Nine, Jesus falls a third time. Imagine you are walking to your death. You are exhausted. It seems that you can not go on any further. Your legs have given out under the weight of your cross. Now look at Jesus. Think as he might be thinking. With the Father's help, I have the strength to get up and endure to the end of the journey. My goal is the salvation of all mankind. At this moment of a pandemic that no one really understands and which has paralyzed the world — brought it to a stand-still, we might examine the image of St. Jude Thaddeus and recall that he is the patron of desperate cases. He might help us to overcome the kinds of narrowness which fear of the future imposes on our hearts, especially at this time. Now, take a look at Jude's image. He is holding a club representing his being hacked, beaten to death as a martyr. The image of Jesus is on his chest — a symbol of healing. The flame above his head is, of course, the symbol of Pentecost where the apostles received the Holy Spirit. Finally, Jude wears green — a symbol of hope and renewal. Combined these symbols ask us to persevere, as Jesus persevered under the weight of the cross and to pray to St. Jude, the patron of desperate cases.

Reflection Questions: How can prayer and resolve encourage us to persevere during this pandemic? As we continue the daily battle with ourselves, the world and our doubts, how can we resolutely rise again and again so that we don't despair? How can we encourage others knowing that with Jesus there really is no such thing as a lost or impossible cause?

At Station Ten, Jesus is stripped of his garments. — leaving Him naked and humiliated. Covid -19 has left us naked. We have been stripped of control over our own destinies. We have not been stripped, however, of our dignity. Dignity is found beneath the skin; it is part of us. In Jesus, innocent, stripped and tortured, we see the outraged dignity of all the innocent. Stripped naked, he symbolizes all the wrong wrongly concealed. Noted, too, is that his tunic remained intact, a symbol of the Church's unity, a unity found in patient journeying. The relic of the true cross upon which Jesus Christ died and shed His Precious Blood is solemnly carried during during the Stations of the Cross. Here in St. Monica's Church every Friday after noon Mass, Father Baker takes us on Jesus' journey with the cross. Although some of us cannot assemble as a community this year to venerate the cross with a kiss, we can recognize that this cross has become a Tree of Life. We must be patient. We must forgive and be forgiven. We must turn to God and ask that our dignity be restored. Bathe us and clothe dear God in your love.

Reflection Questions: How can we avoid the sin of pride and humble ourselves before God?

St. Helena, mother of Emperor Constantine, legend has it, found three crosses at the site of the crucifixion. The Cross of Jesus was distinguished by the other two by laying the crosses on a dead youth who was revived by the touch of the third cross. How can contemplating the relic of the true cross help us to remain faithful, ask for God's mercy, and never give up hope?

How does the cross remind us of our own poverty?

At Station Eleven, Jesus is crucified unmercifully. He refuses to come down from the cross, obedient to the Father's will. He still loves and forgives. If we look at those being tortured for giving the world the virus, we know that they do not deserve to be crucified. They were not responsible for this deadly disease. yet today they are being subjected to harm.

When Frances Xavier Cabrini was a young girl, she made paper boats and loaded them with violets, pretending to send them to evangelize in China. She feared water yet crossed the ocean dozens of times; she was rejected by a religious community because of ill health yet founded her own community. In short, she was a formidable woman who lived a life of many contradictions. She was fearless and knew what she wanted. Mostly, she was a champion of social issues. From health to immigration and workers' rights to the care of the poor, the saint sought to live and to teach others to live with a spirit of selfless service, kindness and a warm

welcome to all. before she was sent to work in America among the Italian immigrants yet she yearned to go to Asia. That is why her name is Frances Xavier, after the Jesuit missionary St. Francis Xavier. who went to Asia and died there. Her love, her heart was for the East. She was sent to the West.

- **Reflection Questions: Have there been times where we did not get what we wanted, but instead found ourselves doing what others needed... and then found it was what we needed as well? What were they? What did you discover?**
- **Frances' love of God moved her to service. Are there ways in which we can serve others, even in this time of plague? If so what are they?**
- **Mother Cabrini loved the people of Asia -who are even now being blamed for a virus they did not create and from which they have suffered greatly. In our own country, Asian Americans are being attacked, even physically. The "Cross," it would seem, is everywhere. Where do you see the cross present these days? Have we in any way allowed the prejudice and anger that brought Jesus to the cross color the way we think and act towards others?**
- **Guide us Jesus by your profound empathy. Help us to say, with sincerity, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do."**

At Station Twelve, Jesus dies on the cross. The seven last phrases uttered are the perfection of His faith, hope and

charity. —“ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mt 27:46); “Remember me...” asks one of the thieves. Jesus responds, “Today you will be with me...” (Lk 23: 42); “ Woman, here is your Son!...” (Jn 19:26); “ I am thirsty (Jn 19:28)”; “ It is finished” (Jn 19:30); “ Father, forgive them ...” (Lk 23: 34) and “ Father into your hands I commend my spirit” (Lk 23: 46).

When we hear these words, what do we see? Do we avert our eyes from the horror of the moment? Do we flee in panic before possible death and suffering. According to Mayor de Blasio, 50% of all NYC residents will be struck by the virus. (hopefully he is wrong)

Nevertheless, we recall the last words of John Paul II who suffered unmercifully for years with Parkinson’s disease. Before collapsing into a coma, he uttered “Let me go to the house of the Father.” For six hours, while a small candle lit up the darkness in his room (a Polish tradition), he slowly faded away. Sickness does not ask permission. It comes unannounced. It limits our choices. It tests our hope. It is a bitter gall.

Reflection: Reflect on this prayer:

“I ask you, Lord, open my eyes
to see you also in suffering, in death,
in the ending which is not the real ending.

Upset my complacency by your cross: shake off my drowsiness.

Challenge me always by your disturbing mystery

that overcomes death and grants life.” (do not know the author)

At Station Thirteen, Jesus is taken down from the cross. Tears and loss mingle. Yet, love is stronger than loss, than death. So it is in the lives of our families and neighbors who grieve and are heartbroken over loss. Before burial, Jesus is returned to his mother. Bent over Jesus’ body, Mary is bound to Him in a total embrace. The icon is known as the “Pieta.” (pity) It shows that death does not break the bond of love. Those who are prepared to sacrifice for Christ will be transfigured on the other side of death. If we recall that not long before his death, Jesus was transfigured before his disciples, confirming his identity as God’s Son, we can appreciate that some disciples fled the scene. We realize that we cannot reason our way into understanding that which is by definition unreasonable — the injustice and cruelty that happens across the world — WHICH IS NOW TAKING PLACE— Nonetheless, St. Thomas, “The Angelic Doctor,” in his “Summa Theologica,” helps us to reconcile the relationship between faith and reason. Most people see no relationship between what they observe naturally using their minds and senses with the theory of revelation. Yet Thomas believed that the two kinds of knowledge are compatible and work in collaboration. He believed that revelation could guide reason and prevent it from making mistakes, while reason could clarify and demystify faith. (See the Summa..., part three). “We will be richer for having walked with him, poorer for having walked away from him.”

Reflection Questions: As we think about Jesus being taken down from the cross, think about how in this time of one challenge after the other, we can, in faith, move forward. How can our focus on salvation and sacrifice console us during this pandemic? on this season of Lent?

At Station Fourteen, Jesus is placed in the tomb. Death without burial was the intended end for the crucified criminal. Joseph of Arimathea saw to it that Jesus would receive the proper burial. With Pilate's permission, Jesus is buried "in a garden in a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid" (Jn 19: 41-42) — a garden in which is planted on solid earth and will bring new life. Unlike the garden of Eden with its overgrown branches blocking us from tasting the bread of God's gifts, the renewal of all things will begin. Today, after days of Congress fighting over power and money and position, a proper stimulus package has been passed for those in need like many small businesses. Equipment, life-giving supplies, such as, masks and ventilators are being provided to hospitals, medical teams. and first-responders like the NYPD and fire department. If we consider the miraculous contributions of one of the most beloved saints and intercessors in our world — St. Anthony of Padua — we might continue to pray for those who have lost jobs, incomes and lives. He is the one who can find lost things. He is the one, it has said, who discovered the miser's heart. (See Donatello's 15th century masterpiece).

St. Anthony was in Italy's Tuscany's region, preaching on the Gospel passage, "For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be" (Luke 12:34) when a moneylender's body was brought into the church for his funeral. St. Anthony declared, "He is already suffering in hell and should not be buried in consecrated ground and his corpse has no heart." Fear, panic and repentance among the mourners broke out. When the cadaver's chest was cut open, Anthony found a money box instead of a man's heart. The miser had chosen earthly wealth over eternal rewards. During this crisis we, the people and the politicians, can choose the divine heart or greed; Satan or the Son, Jesus. We know that there is life after the COVID-19; life after death.

Reflection: Let us reflect on God's mercy, faithfulness and trustworthiness. He will pull us through this pandemic! If we had a fifteenth station, how could the anticipation of the resurrection of Christ elevate our levels of faith, hope and charity. How can it help us to die to the vanities of the world? to celebrate His resurrection in all that we do? Thank you, Lord Jesus, for bearing the weight of the world on your shoulders.