

CUT OFF FROM PEOPLE

A little over a year ago in late March 2020, I learned that the Holy Father, Pope Francis, was going to extend a plenary indulgence from Saint Peter's Square in Rome to all those who believe in Jesus Christ. It would be livestreamed and so I tuned in. I did not really know what to expect and figured that maybe ten or fifteen minutes would handle things. I was totally unprepared for what I encountered. In effect, I, and millions of others all around the world, had an opportunity to make a Holy Hour of Adoration with the Holy Father.

He read from the Scriptures. The passage was of the apostles in one of their fishing boats at night on the Sea of Galilee when a storm arose. Jesus was with them. In the boat with them. They were afraid of the power of the storm and that it might swamp their little craft. Jesus was asleep. They yelled at him to wake up—and save them. He did awake. He asked them why they were so lacking in faith and trust. He then calmed the storm and the sea returned to normal. The Pope made the point that there are similarities with our present worldwide situation with the corona virus. We are truly in the same boat. All of us. And Jesus is with us. In the boat with us. Good to remember. Necessary to remember.

The Pope was alone. A solitary figure under a large canopy before a totally empty Saint Peter's Square. It was darkening twilight and it was raining. Pretty hard. What I saw was Francis, this old and very solitary figure. He was giving a homily by social media to people of all faiths and no faith, all over the world. He put his own faith on the line. After his words he got up and walked out from under the canopy. It was not clear to me where he was going. He went over to a large icon of the Blessed Virgin, Our Lady, Health of the Sick. He prayed for Mary to intercede with her Son, as she did during his lifetime and often in heaven since. He touched the icon at the end of his prayer.

Then he went to the other side of the entryway of Saint Peter's and he prayed before the crucifix from the church of San Marcello. It had burned down during the 1500's. But it's crucifix was salvaged unharmed and undamaged from the fire. A sign while the plague was killing thousands. Francis prayed and touched the corpus of the crucifix and then bowed to kiss the Body of Christ. To me, I began to sense that that is what was actually going on that night. This old pope was giving a kiss to the worldwide Body of Christ.

Francis went inside Saint Peter's. There was an altar with the Blessed Sacrament in a beautiful golden monstrance. The Pope sat heavily in his chair and looked over at Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. And Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament looked back at the Pope. Later there would be prayers of petition begging God's mercy and compassion and forgiveness. Quiet prayers. There was music from the papal choir at various times. In Latin. Beautiful. Haunting. Without understanding any of the words I sensed the meaning. We on earth were crying out in our song for the Lord to be with us as He was with the apostles in the little fishing boat.

Then the Holy Father was draped with a humeral veil and the monstrance was placed in his hands. He turned to walk back out into the darkened night, in the driving rain. Solemn. Grave. Serious. Poignant. Very real. And solitary. And then he lifted the monstrance and blessed

everyone. Three times. In papal fashion. Profound. Moving. Almost breath-taking. Listen to how one man (Mike Pakaluk of The Catholic Thing) described this moment.

As the Holy Father lifted up the Blessed Sacrament in its monstrance last Friday, to impart his blessing, Urbi et Orbi, to the city of Rome and to the world, one of the members of my household got down on her knees in the living room before the big TV. She bowed her head, to receive the blessing. And then so did everyone else, following her lead. By the time the blessing was over, all of us were in tears, struck by the profundity of what we had just witnessed. Perhaps you too were deeply moved.

I certainly was. I will never forget that moment. Something new had just transpired. New. I mean really new. New in all the history of the world. New. As the death of Jesus of Nazareth was new. In that moment the entire face of the earth was being renewed and blessed with the presence of Jesus Christ. (As I typed that sentence the Holy Spirit sent a wonderful anointing, a body flush complete with goose bumps and chills through my body.) There was a uniting of the face of the earth in that moment. There was a renewing of the face of the earth begun in that moment. And we were alive and many saw it happen before their eyes. Up to that point we had all found ourselves cut off from each other and from the presence of Our Lord. Disconnected, cut off from loved ones, family members, co-workers, friends, relatives, those in need, the poor, the homeless, the sick and dying. But in that moment something else was happening. Something transcendent. Something of the Spirit of God. A new connection had been made—with God and with all others on the face of the earth.

Now, with all that in mind go back to the gospel for today. Jesus says to his apostles: “I am the vine, you are the branches... Every branch that bears fruit my Father will prune so that it bears more fruit. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit apart from me, so neither can you unless you remain in me.” If you are cut off from the vine you may look fine for a time and even begin to think you are alive and healthy but you are actually dying and soon this will begin to show. Cut off from the power source, the energy source we cannot live. Cut off from the Lord in a pandemic we cannot stay alive either. But we are not cut off. We are grafted onto the vine and into Jesus Christ.

My friends. Pay attention. There is something going on now and we are not simply returning to what was. No. We are to face into the future and we are to put Christ first. We are not to give in to our fears. We are to remember we have been grafted onto Christ. We are to make sure we stay connected to the Lord who gives us life—and hope—and meaning. Stay connected with the Lord whose grace gives us hope and direction and encouragement. The rest will follow. The day has come for us. The Day of the Lord. Much like his hour did for Jesus. Our true vine.

May the Lord bless us to day and give us his peace.