

## *Stirring Sermons About Coronavirus, in Empty Cathedrals*

With large gatherings banned, ministers offered messages of calm and compassion on Sunday as parishioners watched on live stream.



By Liam Stack

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At 11:15 on Sunday morning, the Rev. Kristin Kaulbach Miles, a priest at Trinity Church Wall Street, stepped into the sanctuary of the soaring 1846 Gothic Revival building in Manhattan and delivered a sermon about the need to come together in the face of coronavirus.

But no parishioners were there.

The scene was repeated at some of the most well-known houses of worship in New York: St. Patrick's Cathedral, the seat of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York; Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church; and the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, seat of the Episcopal Diocese of New York. Something similar had already played out in the city's mosques during Friday prayers and in synagogues at Shabbat services on Saturday.

The coronavirus outbreak forced the cancellation of religious services across New York and much of the country this weekend, but faith leaders have stepped unto the breach in an effort to comfort and lead communities that are increasingly anxious and unsure about where to turn.

On Sunday, ministers preached messages of calm and compassion to empty churches as their congregants watched on live stream, isolated at home by public health warnings that convinced the Catholic Church and several major Protestant denominations to shut their doors.

At Trinity Church, Ms. Miles told the story of Jesus asking a Samaritan woman for water “in a way that follows the Covid-19 safety protocols.” Looking across the empty pews, she urged the worshipers at home to be there for each other.



Dr. Julian Wachner, director of music and arts at Trinity, plays piano during Sunday services. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

“Every hand we don’t shake must become a phone call we make,” she said from the pulpit. “Every inch and every foot of distance we put between ourselves and another must become a thought about how we could help that other should the need arise.”

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Dane Miller, a sacristan, then offered prayers for the sick as well as for President Trump, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo and Mayor Bill de Blasio. He also asked God to grant the faithful good judgment in a time of crisis.

“May we each be guided to the right decisions for the good of all,” he said.

The only people seated in the pews were other parish priests, who clapped for each other when the Mass was done.

There have been more than 600 confirmed cases of coronavirus in New York and two deaths, officials said, sending a wave of fear across the region that has upended daily life.

“The government is utterly failing to provide rational, reliable leadership,” said Jeffrey Cahn, executive director of Romemu, a popular Upper West Side synagogue that he said was the first in New York to cancel in-person Shabbat services.

“As religious leaders we have a pulpit,” Mr. Cahn said. “If we can tell 4,000 people, ‘Even though everybody says do X, we are telling you to do Y and do it now,’ then we should do that.”





Trinity live casts its services each week, but normally with members in the pews. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

Mr. Cahn said his synagogue was now advising congregants not to gather in groups in their homes, even to watch Shabbat services online.

On Friday night, Rabbi David Ingber used the live stream service to offer comfort to worshipers.

“One of the beautiful things now is every place can be a synagogue,” the rabbi said. Despite their dislocation, he told the worshipers that the past week should make them “acutely aware of how interwoven we all are.”

“Even though we are not physically close, we are all connected,” he said.

Others have urged their followers to care for those whose lives have been affected by the outbreak.

“Let us pray for all who are sick, as well as doctors, nurses, caregivers and all those working hard to combat the disease,” Cardinal Timothy Dolan said in a statement on Saturday.

Father James Martin, a Jesuit priest and writer who said he had been in voluntary isolation since returning from a pilgrimage to Israel, gave spiritual advice to his 600,000 Facebook followers on Saturday.

Citing the teaching of Jesus and the work of St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, he urged his viewers to “resist panic” and not to “demonize or scapegoat” Asian people for a pathogen first detected in Wuhan, China.

“This virus is no one’s fault,” Father Martin said in a video. “We still have the fundamental Christian responsibility to love people and not treat them like dirt. Lots of things have been canceled by the coronavirus, but love is not one of them.”

Some religious leaders have also sought to comfort the members of their own clergy.

In a letter last Wednesday, the Rt. Rev. Andrew Dietsche, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of New York, told priests and deacons that they “do not have the freedom to indulge in ourselves the common fears of the masses.”

“We are called to a witness of strength, courage and faith and to be a calm, non-anxious presence in times of fear,” he wrote. He added that “maintaining a normalcy about the common life of our church” could “go a long way to reassuring our people and helping them, in the midst of uncertainty, to live in trust, confidence and hope.”

Liam Stack is a general assignment reporter. He was previously a political reporter based in New York and a Middle East correspondent based in Cairo. @liamstack

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Updated March 14, 2020

- **What is a coronavirus?**

It is a novel virus named for the crownlike spikes that protrude from its surface. The coronavirus can infect both animals and people and can cause [a range of respiratory illnesses](#) from the common cold to lung lesions and pneumonia.

- **How contagious is the virus?**

It seems to [spread very easily](#) from person to person, especially in homes, hospitals and other confined spaces. The pathogen can travel through the air, enveloped in tiny respiratory droplets that are produced when a sick person breathes, talks, coughs or sneezes.

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