

# Orantes

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## Funeral Liturgy in a Time of Pandemic

As efforts continue through social distancing to contain the spread of COVID-19, we hope and pray for a quick end to the pandemic. Nonetheless, recent data indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic could result in many as three to four hundred deaths in Worcester County in the coming weeks before this outbreak of the pandemic begins to abate.

This issue of Orantes seeks to explore the way in which effective and authentic celebrations of the *Order of Christian Funerals* can bring consolation and Christian hope to the present hour.

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## The Heart of Catholic Funeral Liturgy



Catholic Funeral rites are oriented toward the “spiritual aid to the dead and the consolation of hope to the living.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, in the first place, we offer the sacrifice of the Mass, the sacrifice of him who “takes away the sins of the world,” praying that the one who has fallen asleep in Christ might know forgiveness, refreshment, light and peace. The first purpose of Catholic Funeral rites then, is to ask God to release the deceased from whatever purgation or purification might make them fit to join the saints in the Kingdom of Heaven. Sadly, this purpose of Catholic Funeral liturgy often stands in sharp contrast to the general tendency to see Funeral rites solely as an occasion to celebrate and memorialize the life of the deceased.

But there is a second purpose to Catholic Funeral rites, as well: the consolation of the living with the hope of the Gospel. Such consolation begins with understanding the unique pains of the mourner’s heart in this time of pandemic.



Mourners can feel isolated, angry and alone. Gone is the wake when for hours on end people from every part of their loved one’s life would tell stories and console them in their hour of grief. Without this consolation mourners can feel cheated and alienated from the rest of the world. Priests can assure mourners that future opportunities for a Funeral Mass can serve this same function, while sympathizing at how painful the postponement of this communal support can be.

Even now, priests can also garner the support of parishioners and pastoral workers in supporting mourners, to whom they can write or even call, expressing their condolences and the promise of the prayers of the parish faith community.

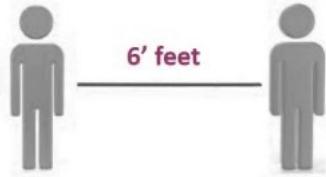
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<sup>1</sup> *Ordo Exsequiarum*, no. 1

With the virus spreading every day and the number of dead seeming to grow without end, a certain hopelessness and fear can also grip the mourner. The antidote to such fear is the sure and certain hope that even to the end God loved the deceased with an infinite love and that our deepest hope is in the fact that God hears our prayers for the deceased.

Most of all, in everything he says and does, the Priest should express the confident hope that God still cares for the mourners and that God's own Son offered his life upon the Cross out of love for the deceased and those who mourn his death. Any way in which the Priest can encourage the mourners to be one in prayer with the rest of the Church for their beloved dead should be pursued and enthusiastically embraced.

## A Different Kind of Funeral



Funerals celebrated in these days of pandemic are filled with challenges. Not unlike the priests of New York, Washington D.C. and Pennsylvania after the terrorist attacks of 911, we face unique opportunities and unique challenges in this present moment.

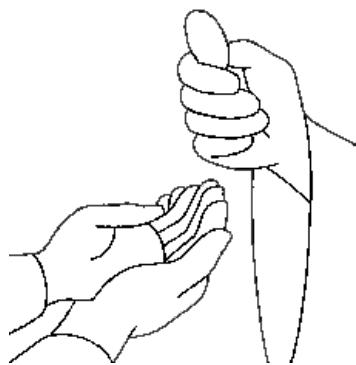
First among these challenges is the limitation placed by the Governor's decree that no more than ten people can be present at a Funeral Mass. After the liturgical ministers, including musicians, this leaves room for no more than five family members.

Even with the limitation on the number of the family, additional measures must be taken to assure social distancing (at least six feet between each person, with every-other-pew blocked off). Pew backs must be disinfected before and after each celebration and other specific adaptations adopted several weeks ago should be carefully observed:

All standing Holy Water should be removed from the fonts;

All door handles and other commonly used surfaces, including in bathrooms should be cleaned before and after the Funeral with a spray disinfectant sufficient to kill cold and flu viruses;

The invitation to the exchange of the Sign of Peace should be eliminated;



An announcement should be made before the distribution of Holy Communion that there is a “public health preference” for Communion in the hand, rather than on the tongue. At the same time, Priests should be aware that they do not have the right to refuse Holy Communion on the tongue.

Holy Communion under the form of bread alone should be distributed to the faithful;

The Priest should use Hand sanitizer before and after distributing Holy Communion. If he accidentally touches the tongue or hand of the communicant, he must place the Blessed Sacrament on the Altar, make use of a hand sanitizer and then return to distributing Holy Communion.

The doors of the Church should be locked during the Funeral to prevent the number in the Church to exceed the legal limit of ten people.

Families may also be provided with the opportunity to celebrate only the Rites of Committal at the cemetery with a Funeral Mass to be scheduled sometime in the future. Families should be assured that a Mass will, in any case, be offered for the deceased person on the day of their burial.

## Funeral Rites During the Sacred Paschal Triduum

Funeral Masses are not permitted from Holy Thursday through Easter Sunday.<sup>2</sup> In its place, the Funeral Liturgy outside Mass is permitted.<sup>3</sup> In addition, all of the rites in the section entitled “Vigil and Related Rites and Prayers” are permitted, as are the various forms of the Rite of Committal.

*Paschalis solemnitatis* no. 61 says, “Funerals [during this period] are to be celebrated without singing, music, or the tolling of bells.” The tolling of bells is suspended from the Gloria of the Evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper on Holy Thursday until the Gloria of the Easter Vigil. The use of solo instruments is prohibited during the course of the Triduum (Roman Missal: Holy Thursday no. 7) Singing is permitted and encouraged during the Triduum. The Order of Christian Funerals in various locations encourages singing at funeral rites. This is difficult to reconcile with the prohibition expressed in *Paschalis solemnitatis*, although it should be acknowledged that certain offices during the Triduum, like Compline for example, were historically always recited rather than sung.



The use of the Easter candle<sup>4</sup> is not mandatory; its use seems out of place on Good Friday and Holy Saturday when the Church is anticipating lighting the new Easter candle at the Easter Vigil. The Easter candle recalls the risen Christ. On Good Friday, the Church remembers Christ’s Passion and Death. On Holy Saturday, the Church honors Christ’s descent among the dead. It may be more consistent to omit the Easter candle on Good Friday and Holy Saturday.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Order of Christian Funerals* no. 178, *Paschalis solemnitatis* nos. 47, 59, 75.

<sup>3</sup> OCF nos. 177-203

<sup>4</sup> OCF no. 187.

During the Liturgy of the Word, readings could be chosen which reflect the events of the Lord’s Passion and Death, as well as his Resurrection.

As always, the Final Commendation can be celebrated at the conclusion of the Funeral Liturgy outside Mass<sup>5</sup> or as part of the Committal.<sup>6</sup> There is nothing to prohibit the use of incense during the Final Commendation on Holy Thursday or the days of the Triduum.

## Choosing Readings in a Time of Pandemic



Special consideration should be given by the Priest to the choosing of readings for Funeral Masses and other rites during this time of pandemic, always keeping in mind “the common spiritual good of the People of God than to his own inclinations.”<sup>7</sup> Scriptures should be selected which express both the unique sufferings of the present moment and well as the sure and certain hope of the Kingdom of Heaven.

A recognition of the suffering of a loved one to pandemic disease might start with the Book of Lamentations, which expresses the inexpressible horror of so many deaths better than any of the scriptures.<sup>8</sup>

My soul is deprived of peace,  
I have forgotten what happiness is;  
I tell myself my future is lost,  
all that I hoped for from the Lord.  
The thought of my homeless poverty  
is wormwood and gall;

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<sup>5</sup> OCF nos. 197-202.

<sup>6</sup> OCF nos. 224-233.

<sup>7</sup> *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, no. 352.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Lamentations 3:17-26 87.

Remembering it over and over  
leaves my soul downcast within me.

If these lamentations express the darkest fears of those who have lost a loved one to this pandemic, the faith of the same author then fans the flames of their hope, recalling that there is a reason to hope: “The favors of the Lord are not exhausted, his mercies are not spent.” He goes on declaring that God is good to the one “who waits for him, to the soul that seeks him.” In a wonderfully prescient conclusion, perfectly attuned to the present agony, he concludes: “It is good to hope in silence for the saving help of the Lord.”

This hope is twofold. More immediately it is the hope that God will not abandon his people and that the pandemic will abate. The second is the eschatological hope for the new Jerusalem, the holy mountain described by Isaiah.<sup>9</sup> This is the hope for that place where “the Lord of hosts will provide for all peoples” and “destroy death forever,” where “the Lord god will wipe away the tears from all faces...”

This is the ultimate hope of those who die in the Lord, the hope of a new heaven and a new earth.<sup>10</sup> This is the ultimate promise that the world of sickness and mourning, of separation and suffering will soon pass away, and in its place will rise “the holy city, a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” This is the place where God “will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, for the old order has passed away.”

So too does the letter of Saint John assures us that “Our true home is in heaven”<sup>11</sup> and it is the vision of that home,

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<sup>9</sup> Isaiah 25:6a, 7-9 86.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Revelation 21:1-5a, 6b-7 107.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. John 11:25a, 26 123.

from which the Lord Jesus will return to save us for which we long. It is with that hope that we recall his words:

“I am the resurrection and the life...  
whoever believes in me will never die.”

“Blessed are those who have died in the Lord;  
let them rest from their labors  
for their good deeds go with them.”

A more philosophical approach is taken by Saint Paul’s letter to the Romans,<sup>12</sup> asking the question: can the present anguish separate us from Christ?



Will anguish, or distress, or persecution,  
or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword?”

Saint Paul responds unequivocally that nothing can separate us from him who loved us:

...neither death, nor life, nor angels,  
nor principalities, nor present things,  
nor future things, nor powers, nor height,  
nor depth, nor any other creature  
will be able to separate us from the love of God  
in Christ Jesus our Lord.

For Christ is the Emmanuel, the Word incarnate, who is with us always until the end of the world.

For this reason, a reflection on the perfect sacrifice offered by the Lord on the Cross is perhaps the clearest articulation of the hope which sustains us, even in the face of death.<sup>13</sup> The Gospel account of the Lord’s death upon the Cross calls us to understand the Lord’s last words as our own: “my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Such an honest embrace of the Lord’s Passion can help us to move

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Romans 8:31b-35, 37-39 95.

<sup>13</sup> Mark 15:33-39 132.

from despair to hope and from the fear of death to the glory of the Resurrection.

Finally, any reading chosen for the burial of a victim of the pandemic must remind mourners of the continuing care which the Lord has for us and for all of his creation. No more beautiful articulation of this reality can be found than the Lord's own words to all who suffer in Matthew 11:<sup>14</sup>

“Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light.”

## Alternative Prayers in a Time of Pandemic



The *Order of Christian Funerals* provides a wide range of prayers for particular circumstances, each of which may be used as a Collect at the Funeral Mass in church or Committal at the cemetery.

While many of the prayers are written for a particular state in life (Bishop, priest, spouse, child, one who worked in the service of the Gospel, etc.), a number of the prayers have special significance in the light of the tragic deaths which result from the present pandemic.

One such prayer acknowledges the pain and confusion faced by families in the light of so tragic a death, asking God to look upon us in grief and asking bluntly “Are you not the God of love?” This explicit articulation of the questioning which lurks deep within the hearts of so many

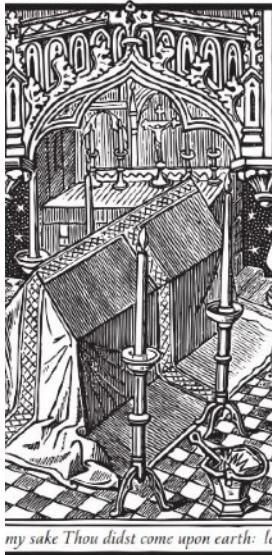
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<sup>14</sup>Cf. Matthew 11:25-30 129.

mourners can assist them in being engaged in the Collect in a significant way.<sup>15</sup>

Lord, in our grief we turn to you.  
Are you not the God of love  
who open your ears to all?  
Listen to our prayers for your servant Margaret,  
whom you have called out of this world:  
lead her to your kingdom of light and peace  
and count her among the Saints in glory.  
Through Christ our Lord.

Other prayers offer hope in a simple and almost childlike way, asking for God, in his “boundless mercy” to grant “a kindly welcome, cleansing of sin, release from the chains of death, and entry into everlasting life.”<sup>16</sup> Another prayer asks that the Lord open our hearts to his word, “so that, listening to it, we may comfort one another, finding light in time of darkness and faith in time of doubt.”<sup>17</sup>



Because a large number of the victims of this epidemic are elderly, priests might consider the use of one of the two prayers written specifically for an elderly person. The first stresses the care of the eternal and timeless God for a person “whose long life was spent in your service.”<sup>18</sup>

God of endless ages,  
from one generation to the next  
you have been our refuge and strength.  
Before the mountains were born  
or the earth came to be,

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<sup>15</sup> 398.2.

<sup>16</sup> 398.10.

<sup>17</sup> 398.11.

<sup>18</sup> 398.37.

you are God.

Have mercy now on your servant Agnes.<sup>19</sup>  
whose long life was spent in your service.  
Give her a place in your Kingdom,  
where hope is firm for all who love  
and rest is sure for all who serve.  
Through Christ our Lord.

The second of the prayers for an elderly person stresses the mercy of the death of the old person “who has set down the burden of his years” and asks that God might give him “the fullness of your peace and joy.”<sup>20</sup>



God of mercy,  
look kindly on your servant David.  
who has set down the burden of his years.  
As he served you faithfully throughout his life,  
may you give him the fullness of your peace and joy.  
We give thanks for the long life of David.,  
now caught up in your eternal love.  
We make our prayer in the name of Jesus who is  
our risen Lord now and for ever.

Three prayers were written for “One who died after a long illness,” yet each is also applicable to one who died after a matter of weeks with COVID-19. The first begins by referencing the affliction and sickness experienced by the deceased and asks that their suffering be joined to the Cross of Christ.<sup>21</sup>

O God, who called your servant Andrew  
to serve you in affliction and sickness, grant, we pray,  
that he who followed your Son’s example of suffering,  
may also receive the reward of his glory.

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<sup>19</sup> Please note that all gendered pronoun alternatives have been deleted from this article for ease of reading. When using liturgical texts the proper pronouns should always be chosen.

<sup>20</sup> 398.39.

<sup>21</sup> 398.39.

Who lives and reigns for ever and ever.

The second of these prayers acknowledges that the deceased “suffered greatly but placed his trust in your mercy” and professes that “the petition of those who mourn pierces the clouds.”<sup>22</sup>

Most faithful God,  
lively is the courage of those who hope in you.  
Your servant Mary suffered greatly  
but placed his trust in your mercy.  
Confident that the petition of those who mourn  
pierces the clouds and finds an answer,  
we beg you, give rest to Mary.  
Do not remember her sins but look upon her sufferings  
and grant her refreshment, light, and peace.  
Through Christ our Lord.



The third of the prayers for “one who died after a long illness” begins with a scriptural reference to the water and manna provided to the chosen people in the desert and thanks God that the suffering of the deceased has been brought to an end, asking that in his endless mercy God might raise him up and that he might rest forever in the joy of Christ, “nourished by the food and drink of heaven.”<sup>23</sup>

O God, you are water for our thirst  
and manna in our desert.  
We praise you for the life of John  
and bless your mercy  
that has brought his suffering to an end.  
Now we beg that same endless mercy  
to raise him to new life.  
Nourished by the food and drink of heaven,  
may he rest for ever  
in the joy of Christ our Lord.

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<sup>22</sup> 398.40.

<sup>23</sup> 398.41.

## Pope Francis: *Why are you Afraid?*<sup>24</sup>

“When evening had come.”<sup>25</sup> The Gospel passage we have just heard begins like this. For weeks now it has been evening. Thick darkness has gathered over our squares, our streets and our cities; it has taken over our lives, filling everything with a deafening silence and a distressing void, that stops everything as it passes by; we feel it in the air, we notice in people’s gestures, their glances give them away. We find ourselves afraid and lost. Like the disciples in the Gospel we were caught off guard by an unexpected, turbulent storm. We have realized that we are on the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented, but at the same time important and needed, all of us called to row together, each of us in need of comforting the other. On this boat... are all of us. Just like those disciples, who spoke anxiously with one voice, saying “We are perishing” (v. 38), so we too have realized that we cannot go on thinking of ourselves, but only together can we do this.



It is easy to recognize ourselves in this story. What is harder to understand is Jesus’ attitude. While his disciples are quite naturally alarmed and desperate, he stands in the stern, in the part of the boat that sinks first. And what does he do? In spite of the tempest, he sleeps on soundly, trusting in the Father; this is the only time in the Gospels we see Jesus sleeping. When he wakes up, after calming the wind and the waters, he turns to the disciples in a reproaching voice: “Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?”<sup>26</sup> Let us try to understand. In what does the lack of the disciples’ faith consist, as contrasted with Jesus’ trust? They had not stopped believing in him; in fact, they called on him. But we see how they call on him: “Teacher, do you not care if we perish?”<sup>27</sup> Do you not care: they think that Jesus is not interested in them, does not care about them. One of the things that hurts us and our families most when we hear it said is: “Do you not care about me?” It is a phrase that wounds and unleashes storms in our hearts. It would have shaken Jesus too. Because he, more

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<sup>24</sup> Pope Francis, *Urbi et Orbi*, 27 March 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Mk 4:35

<sup>26</sup> verse 40.

<sup>27</sup> verse 38.

than anyone, cares about us. Indeed, once they have called on him, he saves his disciples from their discouragement.

The storm exposes our vulnerability and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities. It shows us how we have allowed to become dull and feeble the very things that nourish, sustain and strengthen our lives and our communities. The tempest lays bare all our prepackaged ideas and forgetfulness of what nourishes our people's souls; all those attempts that anesthetize us with ways of thinking and acting that supposedly "save" us, but instead prove incapable of putting us in touch with our roots and keeping alive the memory of those who have gone before us. We deprive ourselves of the antibodies we need to confront adversity.



In this storm, the façade of those stereotypes with which we camouflaged our egos, always worrying about our image, has fallen away, uncovering once more that (blessed) common belonging, of which we cannot be deprived: our belonging as brothers and sisters.

"Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" Lord, your word this evening strikes us and regards us, all of us. In this world, that you love more than we do, we have gone ahead at breakneck speed, feeling powerful and able to do anything. Greedy for profit, we let ourselves get caught up in things, and lured away by haste. We did not stop at your reproach to us, we were not shaken awake by wars or injustice across the world, nor did we listen to the cry of the poor or of our ailing planet. We carried on regardless, thinking we would stay healthy in a world that was sick. Now that we are in a stormy sea, we implore you: "Wake up, Lord!".

"Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" Lord, you are calling to us, calling us to faith. Which is not so much believing that you exist, but coming to you and trusting in you. This Lent your call reverberates urgently: "Be converted!", "Return to me with all your heart."<sup>28</sup> You are calling on us to seize this time of trial as a time of choosing. It is not the time of your judgement, but of our judgement: a time to choose what matters and what

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<sup>28</sup> Joel 2:12.



passes away, a time to separate what is necessary from what is not. It is a time to get our lives back on track with regard to you, Lord, and to others. We can look to so many exemplary companions for the journey, who, even though fearful, have reacted by giving their lives. This is the force of the Spirit poured out and fashioned in courageous and generous self-denial. It is the life in the Spirit that can redeem, value and demonstrate how our lives are woven together and sustained by ordinary people – often forgotten people – who do not appear in newspaper and magazine headlines nor on the grand catwalks of the latest show, but who without any doubt are in these very days writing the decisive events of our time: doctors, nurses, supermarket employees, cleaners, caregivers, providers of transport, law and order forces, volunteers, priests, religious men and women and so very many others who have understood that no one reaches salvation by themselves. In the face of so much suffering, where the authentic development of our peoples is assessed, we experience the priestly prayer of Jesus: “That they may all be one.”<sup>29</sup> How many people every day are exercising patience and offering hope, taking care to sow not panic but a shared responsibility. How many fathers, mothers, grandparents and teachers are showing our children, in small everyday gestures, how to face up to and navigate a crisis by adjusting their routines, lifting their gaze and fostering prayer. How many are praying, offering and interceding for the good of all. Prayer and quiet service: these are our victorious weapons.

“Why are you afraid? Have you no faith”? Faith begins when we realize we are in need of salvation. We are not self-sufficient; by ourselves we founder: we need the Lord, like ancient navigators needed the stars. Let us invite Jesus into the boats of our lives. Let us hand over our fears to him so that he can conquer them. Like the disciples, we will experience that with him on board there will be no shipwreck. Because this is God’s strength: turning to the good everything that happens to us, even the bad things. He brings serenity into our storms, because with God life never dies. The Lord asks us and, in the midst of our tempest, invites us to reawaken and put into practice that solidarity and hope capable of giving strength, support and meaning to these hours when everything seems to be floundering. The Lord awakens so as to reawaken and revive our Easter faith. We have

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<sup>29</sup> Jn 17:21.

an anchor: by his cross we have been saved. We have a rudder: by his cross we have been redeemed. We have a hope: by his cross we have been healed and embraced so that nothing and no one can separate us from his redeeming love. In the midst of isolation when we are suffering from a lack of tenderness and chances to meet up, and we experience the loss of so many things, let us once again listen to the proclamation that saves us: he is risen and is living by our side. The Lord asks us from his cross to rediscover the life that awaits us, to look towards those who look to us, to strengthen, recognize and foster the grace that lives within us. Let us not quench the wavering flame<sup>30</sup> that never falters, and let us allow hope to be rekindled.



Embracing his cross means finding the courage to embrace all the hardships of the present time, abandoning for a moment our eagerness for power and possessions in order to make room for the creativity that only the Spirit is capable of inspiring. It means finding the courage to create spaces where everyone can recognize that they are called, and to allow new forms of hospitality, fraternity and solidarity. By his cross we have been saved in order to embrace hope and let it strengthen and sustain all measures and all possible avenues for helping us protect ourselves and others. Embracing the Lord in order to embrace hope: that is the strength of faith, which frees us from fear and gives us hope.

“Why are you afraid? Have you no faith”? Dear brothers and sisters, from this place that tells of Peter’s rock-solid faith, I would like this evening to entrust all of you to the Lord, through the intercession of Mary, Health of the People and Star of the stormy Sea. From this colonnade that embraces Rome and the whole world, may God’s blessing come down upon you as a consoling embrace. Lord, may you bless the world, give health to our bodies and comfort our hearts. You ask us not to be afraid. Yet our faith is weak and we are fearful. But you, Lord, will not leave us at the mercy of the storm. Tell us again: “Do not be afraid.”<sup>31</sup> And we, together with Peter, “cast all our anxieties onto you, for you care about us.”<sup>32</sup>

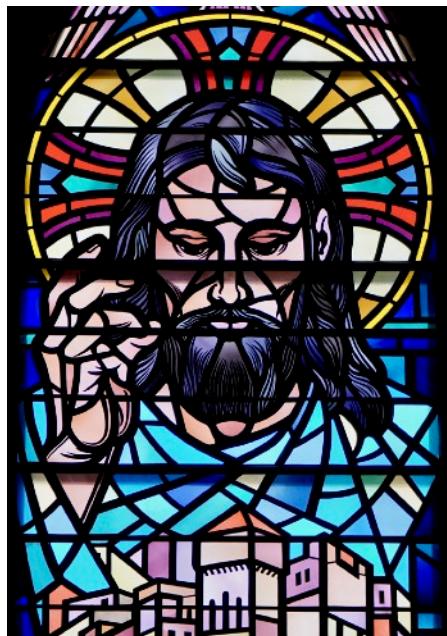
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<sup>30</sup> cf. Is 42:3.

<sup>31</sup> Mt 28:5.

<sup>32</sup> cf. 1 Pet 5:7.

## A Prayer in Time of Pandemic



O God, whose Only Begotten Son  
bore the weight of human suffering  
for our salvation, hear the prayers of your Church  
for our sick brothers and sisters  
and deliver us from this time of trial.

Open our ears and our hearts  
to the voice of your Son:  
*Be not afraid, for I am with you always.*

Bless all doctors and nurses,  
researchers and public servants;  
give us the wisdom to do what is right  
and the faith to endure this hour,  
that we might gather once again  
to praise your name in the heart of your Church,  
delivered from all distress  
and confident in your mercy.

Through Christ our Lord. Amen.