



Dolorosa

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The Defender of God's People

Father Paul Krug, C.S.P.V

In the course of history, man has suffered numerous catastrophes from wars and earthquakes to famines and plagues. One plague, in particular, was accompanied by a wondrous event that cannot but inspire confidence, hope, and strength in our time.

In the early months of 590, a terrible plague broke out in Europe. Italy was one of the hardest hit countries. In his *General History of the Catholic Church*, M. L'Abbé J.E. Darras writes "Italy [suffered] under two fearful scourges, famine and plague; Rome was literally decimated" (II:172). Continuing, he says, "An overflow of the Tiber added the horrors of inundation to the multiplied miseries of disease and hunger. The victims fell by the thousands" (II:172). Among the first to die from the disease was Pope Saint Pelagius II. He had turned his residence into a makeshift hospital for the sick, but in the end he contracted the plague and died on February 8, 590.

One of the greatest men to ever govern the Church was elected as Pelagius' successor. He took the name Gregory and will be forever known as Pope Saint Gregory the Great.

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The first order of business for the newly elected pope was to tackle the deadly plague, which, according to certain Church historians, killed as many as eighty people per hour. Pope Gregory began by directing his efforts to help the sick of the city. He offered Mass daily for his people and continually pleaded with God in prayer to bring about an end to the plague. In addition to this, Gregory frequently exhorted the dying, comforted the living, and encouraged his people to pray and sacrifice.

At length, Pope Gregory ordered a procession through the streets of Rome. This, as certain Church historians tell us, was the origin of the Greater Litanies, which the Church prays to this day each year on April 25. Pope Gregory requested that the Litany of the Saints be chanted, that various prayers be recited by the faithful, and that the venerable image of Our Lady which was painted by Saint Luke be carried at the front of the procession.

According to a venerable tradition, it is said that as the procession advanced with the holy image at its head, the air became healthier, fresher, and clearer and that the odor of plague dissipated as if it could not

stand the presence of the holy picture. The procession moved onward until it reached the bridge uniting the city of Rome to the cylindrical building known at the time as “The Mausoleum of Emperor Hadrian.”

As the pope and his people processed slowly across the bridge chanting the litanies of Holy Mother Church, something astonishing happened. Suddenly, a chorus of angels could be heard. “Regina Coeli, laetare, alleluia!” the heavenly choir sang. “Quia quem meruisti portare, alleluia! Resurrexit sicut dixit, alleluia!” (“Queen of Heaven, rejoice, alleluia! For He, Whom thou didst merit to bear, alleluia! He has risen as He said, alleluia!”) After the angels sang the words “Resurrexit sicut dixit, alleluia,” Pope Gregory responded in a loud voice, “Ora pro nobis Deum rogamus, alleluia!” (“Pray for us to God we beseech thee, alleluia!”) Thus, the *Regina Coeli* was born—the prayer with which we greet our heavenly Mother in place of the *Angelus* during Paschal Time.

What happened next was seen by Pope Saint Gregory the Great alone. His attention was drawn towards the top of Hadrian’s Mausoleum. There he saw a mighty angel holding a sword that was dripping with blood. As Gregory looked on, he saw the angel wipe the sword dry and then place it back in the sheath at his side. By this the pontiff understood that the plague was over.



—Francisco Goya. *Saint Gregory the Great, Pope*. 1796.



After the death of Saint Gregory in 604, the Romans began referring to Hadrian’s Mausoleum as “Castel Sant’Angelo” or the “Castle of the Holy Angel.” Eventually, because it was believed that the warrior angel seen by Saint Gregory was Saint Michael, a statue of the Archangel, sheathing his sword, was placed on the top of Castel Sant’Angelo. To this day, the statue serves as a powerful reminder of God’s merciful answer to the prayers and supplications of the people.

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Today, we, too, are in need of God’s mercy, for the current virus itself and uncertainty about the future have caused fear, worry, and anxiety for many. But, we must remember that fear, worry, and anxiety will not fix anything. They will not make it any easier to bear the difficulties we are facing. Rather, they will serve only to make matters worse. In fact, they already have.

CASTEL SANT'ANGELO ROME, ITALY



We must remember that fear, worry, and anxiety will not fix anything. They will not make it any easier to bear the difficulties we are facing. Rather, they will serve only to make matters worse.

People react in different ways to these kinds of trials. Some people shrug them off as nothing. Others express a moderate concern and take practical steps to endure the difficulty. And, still others give way to fear, worry, and anxiety. These are natural reactions to a crisis. But, we must be ever mindful that God is in control and that nothing happens unless He permits it. Nothing can happen to us or to those we love without His permission. Thus, we must be careful not to let ourselves be influenced by the panic of the world and allow fear, worry, and anxiety to consume us. Instead, let us use these natural reactions to prompt us to make acts of confidence and trust in Our Divine Savior and Our Blessed Mother. We can make use of little invocations such as: “My God, I trust in Thee,” or “Mother Mary, I place this in your hands.” Then, we must leave it there and let God be God—let Him handle the situation, remembering that there is no one more capable of doing so. In moments of fear or when we are tempted to worry, we can even address Our Lord and Our Lady in our own words as though we were having a familiar conversation with them. This form of prayer is applicable now, but it can also be used anytime we are weighed down by trial or sorrow.

I look around at the panic that has ensued in the world, and, while it is true that fear has contributed greatly—thanks, in no small part, to the media—I believe

that the reason there is so much fright is because many people do not have the Faith and many more do not even believe in God. And so, when a crisis like this strikes, these people do not know where to turn for help.

By the grace of God, we have the true Faith. We know Who is in charge, and we know where to turn. What is more, we have Saint Michael on our side. This illustrious leader of the heavenly army is the protector of all the faithful on earth. The Prophet Daniel referred to Saint Michael as the defender of God’s people when he wrote: “But at that time shall Michael rise up, the great prince, who standeth for the children of thy people . . . (Dan. 12:1).”

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As Saint Michael ended the plague at the time of Saint Gregory, he has the power to wipe out the virus today. We must, like Saint Gregory, raise our eyes and hearts to him in prayer and sacrifice and beseech him to deliver us not only from the virus but from the fear that has engulfed our nation. Let us ask him for this, but let us also call upon him for the grace to be the leaders our times call for—leaders like Saint Michael himself. That is, let us, like him, be an example of courage and confidence to others. This we do by remaining calm and encouraging our relatives, friends, and even strangers to place their confidence and trust in God and Our Lady, for they will see us through.



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As we call upon Saint Michael's heavenly assistance, let us also seek his help with the greater evil of mortal sin. This spiritual disease is more widespread and is far more deadly than any other illness. What is perhaps most lethal about this spiritual malady is that very few people are afraid of it. We must therefore do everything in our power not only to avoid becoming infected with it but also to prevent its spread. Very simply, we avoid it by avoiding the occasions of mortal sin—the persons, places, and things that can cause us to fall into mortal

sin. We prevent its spread by leading with our good example. In other words, our lives should be patterns of how a Catholic behaves, what a Catholic says, and what a Catholic believes.

There are so many ways that we can be leaders in our troubled times, and there is no telling how many people we can set on the right road by our conduct. If we, with the help of our heavenly Mother, do our part, there is no telling what great good we can inspire others to accomplish, nor is there telling how many souls we can be instrumental in leading to the eternal kingdom of heaven.

With this in mind, let us go forward with great confidence in God, knowing that the crisis in our country will pass, life will go on, and things will get better. Even after the worst storms, the sun shines again, and in many instances, it shines all the brighter. As true children of the Blessed Virgin Mary, let us place our hand in hers and stay close to her, especially through the Holy Rosary. Let us be those Catholics these times call for—Catholics who are filled with love for God and confidence in Him, who fear nothing save mortal sin, and who are ready to make a difference with their prayers, sacrifices, and good works.

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I close by encouraging all of you to recite daily the attached Prayer to Saint Michael for the intention of bringing about the end of the current crisis and imploring the Archangel to defend us both spiritually and physically.

May Saint Michael, the glorious prince of heaven, protect us both in soul and body. And, having overthrown the enemy, may he sheathe his sword with conviction and assure us that the victory has been won.

