

FINDING CHRIST IN THE CRISIS

What the Pandemic
Can Teach Us

*Study Guide
For Lent*

FATHER HARRISON AYRE
AND MICHAEL R. HEINLEIN

Introduction

Many have remarked that the COVID-19 pandemic has felt like a long Lent. The pandemic got fully underway, of course, in North America in March 2020, at which time every diocese in the U.S. and Canada suspended the public celebration of Mass. The inability to gather for the celebration of the Eucharist continued into the Easter season. Dispensations of the obligation to attend Sunday Mass and certain holy days is still in place in the majority of dioceses. Remarkably, we have come full circle, and the long Lent now bleeds into another Lenten season.

Given the spiritual themes of Lent, this analogy of the pandemic as a “long Lent” is fitting. Lent is a time of penance, and certainly the last year has been full of opportunities to suffer. The challenge of the Christian is to unite these sufferings to the Lord, thereby finding meaning, strength and hope. Lent is also a time of purification. In many ways, this pandemic has served as a great purging. We have fasted in an unexpected way — from spending time with family and friends, even from receiving the Eucharist. Much, both good and bad, has been stripped away from us. Through it all, however, we are presented with an opportunity: to see how God is alive and active, even during a pandemic.

During Lent, Catholics prepare to renew the promises of our baptism at Easter. The pandemic has given us a unique opportunity to reflect anew on the awesome gift of baptism in the life of faith. We have been forced to look for new and innovative ways to live our faith, a great deal of which is dependent upon a fresh look at our baptismal graces, as discussed in the book. As we move into Lent 2021, our challenge will be to bring to light and reflect upon what we have learned during this “Long Lent.” We hope “Finding Christ in the Crisis: What the Pandemic Can Teach Us” will help, along with this study guide.

There are no rules to using this guide. It is broken down into six sections, with each corresponding to a part of the book. You are free to tackle one reflection each week during the six weeks of Lent, or you can use it as a weeklong retreat, engaging with one reflection each day. Another alternative would be for the users of this guide to move through it at leisure throughout the season. Each section offers a brief meditation, reflection questions and an opportunity for guided prayer. The prayers in “Additional Resources” have been assembled to help you, so be sure to look at them in advance.

We hope that Lent 2021 can be a spiritually profitable time of prayer and spiritual growth, and that it becomes an opportunity to further see how God speaks to us in the midst of this Long Lent. May Christ crucified be your strength and his Resurrection be your light.

Father Harrison Ayre and Michael R. Heinlein
Authors, “Finding Christ in the Crisis: What the Pandemic Can Teach Us”
Lent 2021

Exercise 1

READ

Introduction (pp. 9-17)

REFLECT

The season of Lent is a time for renewal. It is a time when individuals and the Church enter into the desert, with Christ, to fast and pray. Lent is a time to examine ourselves, the life of the Church and our response to the mission Christ gives us. Lent calls us back to our Christian vocation and mission by focusing on the need to remove whatever impedes that goal. Lent allows us to open ourselves more fully to Christ and allow him to purify us, especially through his love for us on the cross. Lent reveals the truth, challenges us to more fully accept it, and to commit ourselves to living it with greater fervor and love.

It's easy to think that we are the arbiters of truth, even in dealing with the pandemic. We forget that truth is revealed and given to us first as a gift from the Lord — not something we create. This Lent is an opportunity to discover what Jesus Christ, the Truth, has revealed to us and shapes our response to the situation in which we find ourselves and how to more fully conform our lives to his.

It may also be beneficial to reflect upon the isolation, loneliness, and lack of connection we've all felt during the pandemic. The spiritual dryness and desolation we've all gone through is real, and in all of it, it has revealed our deep need for communion.

That realization — that we are made to be with others — is perhaps one of the deepest truths we can take away from this time, and it can help us encounter the need that God has placed within us: to be in communion with one another. This, in many ways, is the whole goal of Lent: to draw us back to God. By doing so, we draw close to the Holy Trinity, in whose image we are made. The communion of love between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is the original communion that builds up and binds all of humanity.

This Lent, then, is the time for us to take stock of this past year and to reflect upon where we need to grow in communion with one another.

RESPOND

- How can this Lent be a time to build upon the good in my life and eliminate the bad?
- How do I understand truth? Do I determine truth on my own, or do I rely on Christ, who is revealed to us as mediated by the Church?
- How have I attempted to conform the Church to my idea of truth? How can I grow in obedience to the Christian vision of truth?
- How can I come out of the pandemic more actively pursuing communion with my brothers and sisters in Christ?

PRAY

It can be easy to avoid the complex mystery of the Holy Trinity in our prayer. But the Trinitarian image overshadows, defines and gives meaning to everything in our faith — so we must work at it! Spend some time in prayer thinking about the qualities of the Holy Trinity and how they shape our lives.

Let us pray: Holy Trinity, in you is life and freedom. Help us to seek communion wherever it may be found so that we may find the image in which we are made. Help us to seek others as you seek us through your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Exercise 2

READ

Learning from Israel (pp. 19-28)

REFLECT

Our journey through the desert each Lent is filled with strong biblical themes, many of which emerge from the Old Testament. Among the key passages in the Lenten liturgies are those about the 40 years the Israelites spent in the desert seeking the promised land.

The desert itself conjures up images of dryness, desolation, wandering, uprootedness, etc. To be in the desert is to be distant from God and from the ability to thrive. Jesus embraces this with his own entrance into the desert at the start of his public life. No longer is the desert simply a place where God is absent, because in Christ's journey into the desert God is now present in the desolation and wandering. The Church herself — the New Israel — is united to Christ in this journey into the desert. Christ in the desert with us means he is present in the suffering and difficulty found there. Lent gives us an opportunity to encounter God anew, then, even in our suffering and pain. So, too, has this pandemic. By embracing the desert — by embracing God's providence — we are embracing Christ and the life he offers to us.

Israel's journey through the desert was a way of purification, an opportunity to draw them closer to God. God does that same work today, in our desert experiences. This "long Lent" is also a place where God is mysteriously close to the Church because it is Christ's body, even in the desert. And so we must not lose hope. We must cling to his cross and know that his story does not end there.

This Lent, make it a point to focus more intently upon the story of the Exodus. The Church herself embraces it as her own. Each of us can see ourselves in those stories because we are mysteriously present there through Christ. In those stories we can see God at work today.

RESPOND

- What is God challenging the Church to rediscover? The Church exists for one reason: the proclamation of the Gospel. Has the Church and her members embraced this mission?
- Has the loss or restriction of the sacraments caused us to lose faith and hope? Where can I turn for strength and renewal?
- Have I reflected on our attitudes toward the sacraments and understood them as the means of grace towards mission? Or have I understood the sacraments as only benefiting us as individuals? What growth needs to happen so that the grace received will lead to mission?

PRAY

Where Christ has gone we hope to follow. This means following him into the desert, especially each Lent. As we focus on our Lenten journey during the pandemic, let us embrace it as an opportunity to continue following Christ.

Let us pray: God our Father, you are the one who leads us to life. Though the desert is painful and difficult, you give us your Son to journey with us along this way so that he might lead us to you. Help us to embrace our mission to proclaim the Gospel and to have the courage to reform our lives to be centered around you. Amen.

Exercise 3

READ

Some Theological Lessons (pp.28-48)

REFLECT

Often we think of fasting as an opportunity to choose something to give up. There is power in the choosing. And, perhaps, some level of satisfaction, too. Each Lent we might give up dessert or candy, or perhaps alcohol. And we look forward to that glorious Easter day when we can feast on it again.

This pandemic, though, has likely stretched our concept of fasting beyond what has been our normative experiences and practices. Rather than keeping fasting within our control, it has now been put upon us. Because of this, however, we have an opportunity. This helps us zero in on the purpose of fasting: how it is a means to an end, not an end in itself. It is a way to bind us more closely to Christ.

Because of the pandemic and its effects, we have been forced into all kinds of fasting in the past year. We have fasted from friends and relations, vacations, and from celebrating birthdays and holidays. Church life and institutional structures have been diminished. Perhaps, most of all, we were forced to fast from celebrating the sacraments, attending Mass and regularly receiving the Eucharist. It's up to us to seize upon God's gratuitous grace so that these are moments of opportunity rather than occasions for despair. For God does not abandon his people.

Of course the saints and mystics have all encouraged fasting as a means for spiritual growth. The Church obliges most adults to abstain from meat on Fridays during Lent. Fasting is an important spiritual tool. That's because Christ himself fasted and prayed in the wilderness for 40 days. But his fasting and prayer, after which our Lenten season principally is modeled, was not to conclude with a time of feasting — at least as we might think of it.

Rather, Christ's fasting and temptation prepared him for his mission. And we know the Son of Man did not even have a place of his own to lay his head. Christ's public life began en force after his baptism and desert experience. Submerged in the waters of the Jordan River by John the Baptist, Christ took upon himself the sins of man. And he emerged from the waters to journey the way to Calvary, starting in the desert, so that he might die to sin and rise to life. In other words, his fasting and prayer led to mission. Our own fasting and prayer must do the same.

RESPOND

- How has my baptism prepared me to respond to the difficulties of this moment? How can I still grow spiritually at a time when ecclesial and sacramental life is (temporarily) diminished?
- What is a spiritual practice that you have adopted during the pandemic? How has it helped you grow?
- How can we emerge from this pandemic as a stronger Church? How can we move from the various forms of fasting we have had to undertake and serve the mission Christ gives us in the world?

PRAY

Many of the saints have urged us frequently to recall our union with Jesus and express our longing for fuller union with him. To achieve this, many saints recommend an act of spiritual communion each day, or several times a day. It is said that St. Francis de Sales, a great spiritual teacher, bishop and doctor of the Church, observed this practice every quarter hour. How can you make an act of spiritual communion a regular part of your prayer life this Lent? One option is included in the "Additional Resources" section.

Exercise 4

READ

The Pattern of the Cross (pp. 49-60)

REFLECT

None of us is immune from suffering and death. These realities mark all of our lives, even Christ's, and we have seen a great deal of both during this pandemic. While the world generally does not understand the redemptive value of suffering — as our faith instructs — that does not mean Christians are masochists who relish in the sufferings of life. But it's also true that when it comes, we are meant to embrace it.

St. Paul boasts of glorying in the cross of Christ, the means of our salvation. And we know that Christ's own cross was borne out of obedience to his Father and out of love for all. The cross stands as the icon of our call to obey God's will and our call to lay down our lives for others in love of him. Therein lies our hope and salvation.

So while it might be natural to want to complain about the sufferings we have endured, we would do better to embrace them for the good. This can be the spiritual good of ourselves or others, or the physical good, too. Our obedience to God in the image of Christ crucified means that we do not live for ourselves but for others. It means that our lives are to be marked by Christ's charity, which itself took the form of a cross. With his arms outstretched on the cross, Christ was a man for all men.

This pandemic has given us many opportunities to respond radically to this call. In some ways, the steps we have needed to take to help eradicate the spread of the coronavirus have required us to lay down our lives for the good of others. We have to put aside our pride and trust public health experts. We have had to set aside personal freedoms, such as having to don masks that often present their own limitations or change the way we live in society.

As baptized Christians, we have been conformed to Christ crucified, and this pandemic has given us the opportunity to truly respond to that call. Lent is the opportunity the Church presents to us for taking stock of our own lives and how well we are living up to that call. And we do so as we journey alongside Christ, partaking in his suffering, on the way to Calvary.

RESPOND

- What sufferings have I endured this past year? Do I trust that God will bring good from them, beyond my expectations?
- What is the role of Christ's cross in my own prayer life? Do I see the cross as central to my own life as it should be? Do I try to run from it?
- Am I quick to give thanks for my life, or am I quicker to complain? How can I adopt a natural posture of gratitude? How can I more deeply reflect on Christ crucified? How can my example be more like his?

PRAY

Each Lent, parishes and individuals throughout the world turn to the Stations of the Cross as an emblematic prayer for the season. Each station typically begins: "We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you. Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world." Spend some time in prayer holding a crucifix and simply repeating those words. Ponder how your life can be a reflection of those words. Pray that God gives you the strength to carry Christ's cross in your life, especially when it is most difficult.

Exercise 5

READ

Some Spiritual Lessons (pp. 60-74)

REFLECT

Lent should bring about spiritual renewal and help us recognize that not all is settled in our hearts. The season calls us to give our hearts to the Lord completely, so that Easter can be all the more fruitful. Lent exists to be a precursor to Easter and is, therefore, imbued with hope. We build up this hope by constantly renewing our spiritual lives — especially in prayer, which plays a vital role during Lent.

We embrace the discipline of prayer more fervently with our various Lenten disciplines. The Stations of the Cross are a popular mode of devotion whereby we meditate on the death of Jesus, bringing to our minds and hearts the reality of what he did for us. Other popular disciplines during this time include increased daily prayer, the Liturgy of the Hours, more frequent attendance at Mass or the practice of a daily particular devotion.

The purpose of our increased discipline of prayer in Lent, though, is not to be self-serving. We do not simply do it for the sake of our own spiritual good. Rather, we take it on so that we might grow in communion with Jesus and renew our obedience to his mission to love others as he loves. To put it differently, the graces we receive in prayer are meant to be given away. Lent is a time to refocus on this, to turn away from focusing on ourselves and to share in the gaze of Jesus who is always looking outward to those in need of God's love. This is one of the principal purposes of prayer.

Our Lenten attentiveness to prayer, then, helps us fight against the things that cause our resistance to God. Sin's tendency to dominate our lives and draw us inward can be counteracted by prayer, since it rekindles our desire for God and motivates us to respond to our Christian vocation of charity. Therefore, Lent does not only increase our life of prayer, but it is an exercise in spiritual combat, where we fight against the spiritual forces that pull us away from God. And prayer is where this is all worked out.

While so much has been put upon us since last Lent, we might not need to take on any radical penances this Lent. But we can at least take the time to focus more intently on our prayer life, to intensify our bond with Christ and fortify our resolve to follow him more closely.

RESPOND

- What is a "good" for which I need to rekindle my desire? How can I deepen or rekindle my desire for God and others?
- What are the needs of others around me to which I should attend? To whom in my family or community can I begin to reach out? How can I be more generous?
- What does my daily prayer life at home look like? What should it look like? What sort of things do I need to make praying at home a success?

PRAY

This Lent, try to identify three things in prayer: one "good" you need to appreciate more; one vice to focus on overcoming; and one new way to help others.

Let us pray: Father, help us to embrace the disciplines of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving so that we can draw close to you so that we may bring others to you through the generous Christian love you ask of your Church. May our Lenten disciplines immerse us more fully into Christ's life. Amen.

Exercise 6

READ

Lessons from Saint Damien of Molokai (pp. 74-86)

REFLECT

The whole of the Christian life yields fruit, and this is especially evident in the lives of the saints. The story of St. Damien of Molokai reminds us that God's grace works. His life mirrors the charity, service and sacrifice of Christ in a marvelous way. And his time is not entirely unlike our own, which is why his story gives us so much hope. While the circumstances might be different, our lives are called to look like his.

Just as Lent keeps before us the significance of baptism in our lives, so too does it help us recall baptism's proper end: our own holiness. The lives of the saints are worthy of our attention and focus in this effort, for we can see in them the Christian response to the challenges of life.

Our call to be saints is as unique as each of us. But the ways in which we respond to the situations of life should look the same. The saints' lives are defined by virtue, and ours should be, too. Our faith should inform our actions, our hope should motivate us, and our charity should define us. Our prudence should be conformed to the logic of the Gospel. We should be marked by sound-mindedness as we discern the truth, and we should be just as we apply it to the circumstances of life. And we must be strong in our commitment to follow Christ wherever he may lead.

Saint after saint has emerged from the various crises that mankind has faced throughout the two Christian millennia. This time in which we live is a time for saints. Are we responding to the call?

Our invitation to follow after Christ comes, after all, not as one of wealth, power, pleasure or honor. It is, rather, to take up our cross and follow him. And so, these times are ours. These times are for us. God calls us to share more fully in his life and to mirror it to the world through the crisis we face. Fortified by God's grace and formed by his Word, we are called to respond to our circumstances as the saints have done.

RESPOND

- Are you devoted to a particular saint? If so, take some time to reflect upon his or her life, asking for their intercession. If not, ask God to point you to one — perhaps your confirmation saint or a saint who might share your name.
- What is one virtue that you can work on strengthening? Who is a saint who can offer an example of excellence in this virtue?
- What is one small step you can take this Lent to facilitate greater devotion to the saints?

PRAY

In order to name our faults and identify our weaknesses, the Church invites us regularly to reflect upon the reality of our own sinfulness. In the lives of the saints, and even in the story of St. Damien, recourse to the sacrament of penance was a key aspect of their growth in holiness. To celebrate it well, we must be immersed in an awareness of where we live up to — and where we fail to live up to — God's desire for our lives. Adopting a daily examination of conscience is a practical way of doing this.

Conclusion

This brief Lenten guide is meant to be a way to take stock of the past year in light of the themes of the season. Perhaps, of all our Lents, this is one in which our disciplines may not need to be too excessive because the Lenten themes have been imposed upon us through the last 12 months. Instead, let this be a time of reflection: to seek the Lord and find him along his Way, which is the way of the cross that ends in the Resurrection.

Though it may be difficult to see right now, the past year has been filled with God's grace. Grace often comes through deep suffering. Jesus meets us in our pain and, through the power of his cross, shares in it with us to draw us into new life. It is rare that the grace and hope can be seen in the midst of the suffering, but deeply, mysteriously, it is there.

Lent really is a time to double down in our desire for this grace. May this Lent build up our hope that we are not abandoned and that Christ really is with us. Despite all of the difficulties that we face, despite how tired and frustrated we are with everything, despite the loneliness, isolation, depression and countless other real maladies that have arisen in this time, may this Lent open our eyes to the reality that Christ is with us in all of it. None of our suffering is wasted in Christ. Instead, it is united to his cross to draw us and the whole world into new life — his own very life offered to us at Easter.

Lent, then, really is an opportune time of encounter with Jesus. May this Lent be a quiet season which we can use as a time to recognize and accept we are still in the desert with Christ, and that we have an opportunity for grace through embracing the lessons and crosses that have been thrust upon us since last Lent. May Christ's peace be with you.

Additional Resources

Prayer to the Holy Trinity

(an excerpt from a prayer by St. Elizabeth of the Trinity)

O my “Three,” my All, my Beatitude, infinite Solitude, Immensity in whom I lose myself, I give myself to you as a prey to be consumed; enclose yourself in me that I may be absorbed in you so as to contemplate in your light the abyss of your greatness!

—

An Act of Spiritual Communion

My Jesus,
I believe that You are present in the Most Holy Sacrament.
I love You above all things, and I desire to receive You into my soul.
Since I cannot at this moment receive You sacramentally, come at least spiritually into my heart.
I embrace You as if You were already there
and unite myself wholly to You.
Never permit me to be separated from You.
Amen.

Prayer Before A Crucifix

Look down upon me, good and gentle Jesus
while before Your face I humbly kneel and,
with burning soul,
pray and beseech You
to fix deep in my heart lively sentiments
of faith, hope, and charity;
true contrition for my sins,
and a firm purpose of amendment.
While I contemplate,
with great love and tender pity,
Your five most precious wounds,
pondering over them within me
and calling to mind the words
which David,
Your prophet, said to You, my Jesus:
“They have pierced My hands and My feet,
they have numbered all My bones.”
Amen.

—

The Jesus Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God,
have mercy on me, a sinner.

Prayer Before Confession

Come, Holy Spirit, enlighten my mind that I may clearly see all my sins.
Let me not be deceived by self-love, but show me the true state of my conscience.
Move my will to sincere sorrow; help me to make a good confession.
Holy Mother of God, intercede for me that I may obtain the pardon of my sins.
Amen.

—

An Act of Contrition

O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest all my sins because of thy just punishments, but most of all because they offend Thee, my God, who art all good and deserving of all my love.
I firmly resolve with the help of Thy grace to sin no more and to avoid the near occasion of sin.
Amen.

Prayer for Leading a Holy Life
(St. Thomas Aquinas)

Grant O merciful God, that I may ardently desire, carefully examine, truly know and perfectly fulfil those things that are pleasing to You and to the praise and glory of Your holy name.

Direct my life, O my God, and grant that I might know what you would have me to do and for me to fulfil it as is necessary and profitable to my soul.

Grant to me, O Lord my God, that I may not be found wanting in prosperity or in adversity and that I may not be lifted up by one nor cast down by the other. May I find joy in nothing but what leads to You and sorrow in nothing but what leads away from You.

May I seek to please no one or fear to displease anyone, save only You.

Grant to me, O Lord God,
– a vigilant heart that no subtle speculation may ever lead me from You;

– a noble heart that no unworthy affection may draw me from You;

– an upright heart that no evil purpose may turn me from you.

Give me a steadfast heart that no tribulation may shatter and a free heart that no violent affection may claim as its own.

And finally, grant me O Lord my God, a mind to know you, diligence to seek you, wisdom to find you.

Give me a way of life pleasing to You; perseverance to trust and await You in confidence that I shall embrace You at the last.
Amen.

Hail, O Queen of Heaven!

Welcome, O Queen of Heaven.
Welcome, O Lady of Angels
Hail! thou root, hail! thou gate
From whom unto the world, a light has arisen:

Rejoice, O glorious Virgin,
Lovely beyond all others,
Farewell, most beautiful maiden,
And pray for us to Christ.

V. Allow me to praise thee, O sacred Virgin.

R. Against thy enemies give me strength.

Grant unto us, O merciful God, a defense against our weakness, that we who remember the holy Mother of God, by the help of her intercession, may rise from our iniquities, through the same Christ our Lord.
Amen.

About the Book

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Father Harrison Ayre is a priest of the Diocese of Victoria (Canada) where he is currently a pastor and cohost of the Clerically Speaking podcast. He has two degrees in theology from Newman Theological College. He is a frequent contributor to OSV's Simply Catholic and is a Ph.D. student at Maryvale Institute, studying Joseph Ratzinger's theology of the human person.

Michael R. Heinlein is editor of OSV's Simply Catholic and has a degree in theology from The Catholic University of America. Experienced in parish ministry and high school education, Michael is a frequent contributor to OSV publications and author of *The Handy Little Guide to Spiritual Communion* and editor of *Black Catholics on the Road to Sainthood*. Most important to him is his role as husband and father.

WHERE TO FIND THE BOOK

Individual orders:

www.Amazon.com

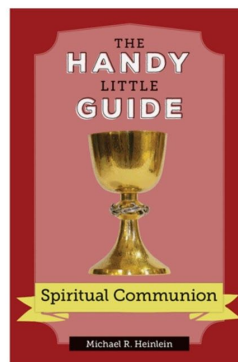
www.OSVCatholicBookstore.com

Bulk Orders:

www.OrderOSV.com

In Canada:

www.bbroughton.com



Also from
Michael R. Heinlein
"The Handy Little Guide
to Spiritual Communion"

The suspension of Masses worldwide as an effort to control the spread of COVID-19 has many Catholics longing for Holy Communion, but even in normal times there are other reasons Catholics may be unable to attend Mass or receive the Eucharist. That's why it's more important than ever for Catholics to understand and practice spiritual communion.

Available at: www.OSVCatholicBookstore.com

Upcoming Event



THE CATHOLIC
LAWYERS GUILD
OF CHICAGO



YOUNG CATHOLIC
PROFESSIONALS
CHICAGO

2021 LENTEN RETREAT

Finding Christ in the Crisis: *What the Pandemic Can Teach Us*

an online virtual event

Saturday, March 13, 2021 | 9:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m



Michael R. Heinlein
*Editor, Our Sunday
Visitor's Simply Catholic*



Fr. Harrison Ayre
*Pastor, St Peter's in Nanaimo
Co-host, Clerically Speaking*

Register | clgchicago.org/retreat