

Pastoral Letter

From the Bishop of Killala

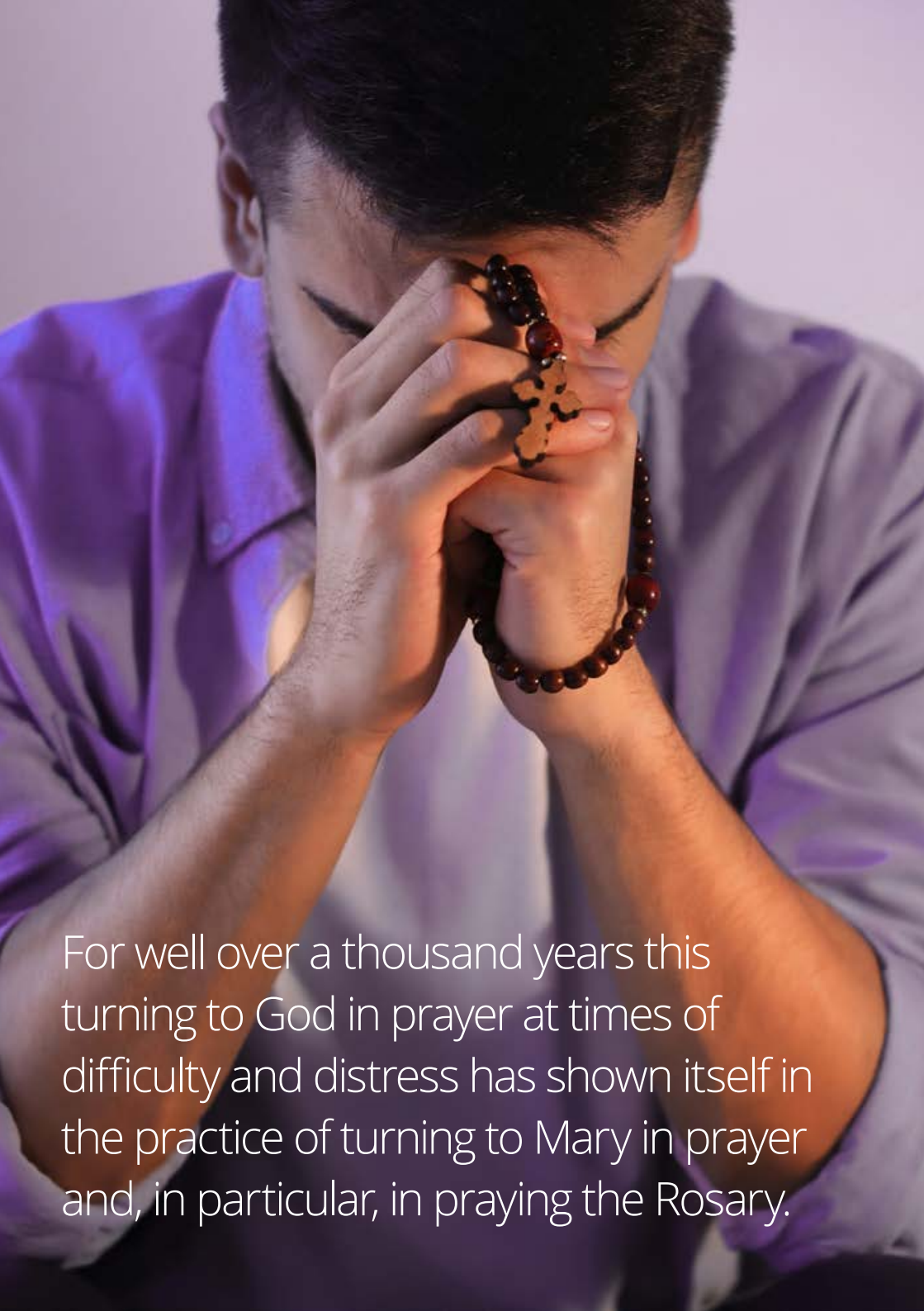


Faith during a time of Pandemic


October 7th, 2020

*“Hope in Him.
Hold firm and take heart.
Hope in the Lord”*

(PSALM 27)



For well over a thousand years this turning to God in prayer at times of difficulty and distress has shown itself in the practice of turning to Mary in prayer and, in particular, in praying the Rosary.

A microscopic image showing several spherical virus particles with a textured, purple surface, set against a dark background. The particles are scattered across the frame, with some appearing larger and more detailed than others.

A tiny particle, by now familiar in its shape on our television screens, has spread through our planet, our Common Home, Earth and brought it to its knees. Every aspect of life has been touched by this tiny particle; fear generated, over a million deaths caused, over thirty four million illnesses recorded and every economy, country and individual affected.

Very few occasions in the history of the world have seen a catastrophe on such a worldwide scale. Even if two wars in the past were described as world wars, most of the great catastrophes in history were confined to a number of countries or continents. But this pandemic is different. It is not out there. It is in the very air we breathe, the surfaces we touch and the people we meet.

The time of the pandemic that we are still going through has forced the world to stop. Our homes have become a place of refuge from the contagion; our streets have nearly emptied. Our churches have been affected and public liturgical celebrations are either curtailed or not allowed. Our homes, as a result, have become what Pope Francis calls 'the domestic church'. It is here that we can now rediscover the fact that "Families are the first place where the values of love and fraternity, togetherness and sharing, concern and care for others are lived out and handed on" (Fratelli Tutti, 114). While we cannot gather around the Table of the Eucharist in our churches at present, we still have the Table of the Word available to us in the Bibles in our homes. Time spent with the Bible can prepare us for a new life of faith when Mass returns. Time spent with family on Saturday evenings or Sunday mornings reading the Readings of Sunday will also help us to get to know God

ourselves and nourish our faith. With no football matches to play or attend, with no Mass to go to perhaps God is saying to us; "be still and know that I am God." (Psalm 46). In this regard, it is good for us to remember that when the temple in Jerusalem where Jesus prayed was destroyed, the Jews and Gentiles, not having the temple, gathered around the family table, prayed together and deepened their faith.

Human reactions to catastrophes in the past have been varied but they have also nearly always been marked in particular by a turning to God in prayer. And turning to God in prayer at a time of need is at the very heart of our relationship with God. It is at the centre of the way in which God makes himself known to each of us and deepens our faith. His response, which is often mysterious to us, in fact generates faith in us once we are open to this. It is with this hope that we turn to him in prayer at this time. Sometimes we feel guilty about this and say to ourselves; 'I only turn to God when I'm in trouble'. But all through the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms, God says to us, as he does in Psalm 50; 'Turn to me in the day of trouble and I will save you and you will honour me'. And Jesus continued this. When looking at the city of Jerusalem in its distress he said; "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem. How often would I have gathered your

children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing” (Mt 23.37).

For well over a thousand years this turning to God in prayer at times of difficulty and distress has shown itself in the practice of turning to Mary in prayer and, in particular, in praying the Rosary. We need only recall how Pope Pius V asked the Christian world to pray the Rosary to ask God for victory in a famous sea battle at Lepanto in 1571. And when the Turkish fleet were beaten against all the odds, the Pope established the Feast of the Most Holy Rosary on October 7 in thanksgiving to the Mother of God. And there are other, lesser examples. And of course we have Lourdes, Fatima and Knock, together with the lived experience of so many people, including ourselves, who pray the Rosary, especially at times of personal difficulty.

Last April, when the pandemic was raging, Pope Francis wrote a short letter. He said: ‘The month of May is approaching. ... It is traditional in this month to pray the Rosary at home within the family. ... The key to doing this is always simplicity.’

Simplicity is the key to saying the Rosary today. We can but we don’t need to gather everyone in the kitchen before we can start. We can say it in the car while we are driving, handsfree, no beads, just our fingers and we have ten of them. We can say it while our for a walk or a jog. Like many who live alone, we

can sit quietly at home, on our own, when we have no one to visit us. We don’t need open churches in order to say the Rosary. We can pray it anywhere. And we can say it in hours of greatest need, as we gather at the bedside of one about to return to the Father’s house in death. In all of this prayer can become central to our lives and enrich us; giving us a sense of peace and calm, a feeling of security, as we entrust everything, including this pandemic, to God’s unconditional love of us.

As this pandemic continues to hold its grip on us, we all need to turn to God in prayer and with hope. At this time of year, as the wonderful world of nature begins to shed its autumnal cloak, we are reminded of the enduring power of nature to regenerate itself next Spring. For us, this is a reflection of God’s love for his world, this planet, our common home. This love, God’s love, will sustain us during this time of pandemic. I urge everyone, therefore, to turn to God and to Our Lady, to pray for an end to this pandemic. Prayer got us through great difficulties in the past. It will do the same for us today.

Let me end with a line from Psalm 27. ‘Hope in Him. Hold firm and take heart. Hope in the Lord’.

+ John

Bishop of Killala.

October 7th, 2020.

Feast of Our Lady of the Rosary.

