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Spirituality



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It is such a surreal time right now.

Like everyone, I have carefully observed coronavirus shelter-in-place directives. The disruption of my usual routine has led to occasional feelings of unreality, but it has also brought unexpected blessing.

I luxuriate in slower mornings with more time to reflect. In unsought solitude, I discover a deepening appreciation of a God who is not only beyond-all-names but beyond-all-words. A newfound spaciousness invites me to rest in that divine "ground of Being" so aptly described by Paul Tillich.

Perhaps this explains why I am not freaking out as much about overwhelmed nurses and doctors or about a bloviating president who refuses to take responsibility for a plague he could have done so much more to prevent.

Yes, I know, we should be freaking out about these things. But in the end, it is counterproductive to become paralyzed by things beyond our control. We can only acknowledge our powerlessness and trust God.

I also sought community and comfort during the latter part of Lent, Holy Week and the Easter season. It was instructive.

The first learning is how uninspiring livestreamed Masses are with a solo male priest presider and no people. All-male cantors and the priest performing all the readings only made things worse. I tried but could not seem to find myself (or God) in that context.

The second learning is that what *does* work are online interactive sessions.

I regularly share online Liturgies of the Word and Faith Sharing with the FutureChurch community and with friends I made on our recent pilgrimage to Greece. We pray, we listen to the word of God, we listen to Catholic Women Preach,

and then we interact with one another in Zoom "breakout " rooms.

Jesuit Fr. Jim Martin's informal Facebook faith sharings were also wonderful, inviting thousands of followers to an interactive reflection on the word of God during Holy Week. At last count, his Facebook posts had as many as 50,000 views.

We need a community of faith to support one another.

My dear friend Medical Mission Sr. Estelle Demers emailed this observation: "This viral event may be leading us to another kind of collective understanding. Everyone is a member of the 'Jesus tribe.' Everyone is invited to 'practice humanity' as Governor Andrew Cuomo said. I think Jesus would approve."

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Our faith communities can also help us grapple with confounding events, the most recent of which — for me anyway — was the April 8 announcement about Pope Francis' new commission on women deacons. Several commission members do not favor ordaining female deacons. It does not take a rocket scientist to see the writing on the wall.

Francis is apparently either ignoring calls to ordain female deacons as requested by the synod on the Amazon, or hoping to establish nonordained "deaconettes" about which I have written previously.

On Holy Thursday, I participated in a Zoom agape meal with folk who journeyed together exploring sites of female co-founders of first-century Christian communities in Greece.

The liturgy was beautifully prepared by FutureChurch co-director Russ Petrus, who holds a Master of Divinity from Weston Jesuit School of Theology and Ministry at Boston College and has extensive experience as a musician and liturgist.

Kay, a laywoman from New York, led us in prayer. We remembered Jesus as we broke bread and raised our individual cups of wine in front of our webcams. There was no epiclesis so no one could accuse us of attempting to say Mass.

But there were many priests around our virtual table.

We were laity, mostly women, exercising our baptismal priesthood to break bread and share wine — as Jesus had asked us to do — in memory of him. No coronavirus could keep us from Holy Thursday's greatly loved commemoration of the one who washed our feet and gave his body and blood to heal a broken world. A brokenness-unto-death so deeply apparent right now.

At the prayers of the faithful, we asked to be faithful to Christ's example of foot-washing service:

> Wash us, O God, of nationalism, xenophobia, racism and all forms and systems of prejudice and oppression — that our lands may be spaces of bountiful welcome, sanctuary, refuge and opportunity we pray: *Wash us, O God, and make us servants to one another.*
>
> Wash us, O God, of feelings of despair and helplessness in this time of pandemic — that we may reach out to one another in tender care and seek new and creative ways to be in communion and solidarity with each other, we pray: *Wash us, O God, and make us servants to one another.*

Virginia Saldanha's superb Holy Thursday homily on Catholic Women Preach spoke of Jesus' challenge to a servant leadership that involves "humility in service and sacrifice even to the extent of breaking one's body and shedding one's blood."

Women, said Saldanha, are "living this model of priesthood. ... Where you may not find a sacramentally ordained priest, many women around the world are living the priesthood of Jesus." Women who serve economically poor indigenous people in India and Amazonia — sometimes even to the point of death — "show the least and the last the loving and compassionate face of God."

"Women live their priesthood where they are planted," preached Saldanha, "and demonstrate to the sacramentally ordained ministers what the priesthood of Jesus truly means."

So yes, I came to realize that the confounding news of patriarchal churchmen, once again denying female priestly giftedness, cannot stop women from sharing their experience of Jesus' death-and-resurrected-Spirit-energy at work in our world.

This is what grounds my rest in the loving power of a God who is not only beyond all names, but beyond the power of human blindness.

I understand now why Jesus had to speak out against a religious and political leadership that futilely sought to obstruct God's loving reign breaking forth all around him.

I only hope I have the courage to follow.

[St. Joseph Sr. Christine Schenk, an NCR board member, served urban families for 18 years as a nurse midwife before co-founding FutureChurch, where she served for 23 years. Her recent book, *Crispina and Her Sisters: Women and Authority in Early Christianity*, was awarded first place in the history category by the Catholic Press Association. She holds master's degrees in nursing and theology.]

Editor's note: *We can send you an email every time Christine Schenk's column, Simply Spirit, is posted. Go here to sign up.*

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