

“Usque ad mortem” – a priest’s prayer for Good Friday

“Christus factus est pro nobis, obediens usque ad mortem” (lit. “Christ was made obedient for us even unto death” – from the Liturgy of Good Friday)

The priest sat quietly in the empty church
normally full of Good Friday worshippers
coming to commemorate the greatest love of all
and venerate the symbol of it,
but not today –
and certainly not any day soon, if at all.
He looked into the face of the dying Saviour,
contemplating his wounds, his agony,
and thought of the countless frontline souls
deliberately putting themselves at risk of the same fate,
albeit not maybe so gruesome,
for the salvation of the world – literally -
at this very moment.

The professionalism, caring and faithfulness of some
had already led them ‘usque ad mortem’,
‘even unto death’, their death,
and many more would surely follow.
He thought of the 50 Italian brother priests
who had also made that sacrifice themselves so gladly
after the example of their Lord,
and guiltily asked himself, ‘so what about you?’

How could he sit comfortably cossetted in his presbytery,
self-isolated, self-distanced from those he was supposed to serve,
reading once again in the comfort of his home
that Good Friday Passion story
without the prospect of ever being truly involved in it himself,
as those brothers had been?
How could he continue – well-fed from the kindness of good souls
making sacrifices from their own increasingly sparse tables
just for him -
and with a diet of TV banality
to cover up and help us escape the full horror
of this unfolding tragedy
and not associate himself with them
living and working daily in the full face of it,
never knowing the moment it might strike them too?
And what of his people,
many struggling at home on their own

with what are now referred to as ‘underlying health problems’
and the sword of Damacles hanging forebodingly over them
with the possible, even likely result of their contracting the virus too?
Was it really enough to spend his time thinking up systems whereby others
– kindly and enthusiastic volunteers –
could phone or even visit them,
doling out food and friendship at the required distance from their doorsteps
in a sincere attempt to bring some sort of encouragement and comfort to them
without actually being engaged in that process himself?

And the funerals to be arranged on the phone
and celebrated in virtually empty crematoria
with heartbroken families having to sit in small numbers,
kept apart from each other,
their full grieving having to be postponed
until some as yet undetermined date?
And the elderly brother priest up the road
whose mind was slowly deteriorating in what -
before now - was thought to be the most cruel of diseases
who awaited his twice daily visits
in increasing confusion and disorientation,
lonely from the lack of contact with his people
whom he had served in the one place for over 40 years
and gradually losing what little independence he had left.
How could he abandon him to a solitary and uncertain fate?

There was a serious risk in going out
and doing what was necessary for him and all of them
and the prospect of his own demise in so doing was a real one
given past and present health difficulties
which periodically played on his mind,
but sitting in the church on that Good Friday looking at the cross,
the priest’s mind was finally made up and his resolve determined:
He would go out and go on.
How could he do any other?
This was the meaning of his ordination;
this was the price of his love and service
and now he could see that it had to be paid
despite whatever might eventually happen to him personally
‘usque ad mortem’.

