

**Opening prayer:**

*Candle Lighting:*

Lighting a candle is a simple yet profound act. It is a testimony to the power of light over darkness. When we look at the world around us we can see pain and suffering. But as we light this candle, we see that it shines brightly in the darkness. As we press forward in our struggles and hardships as so many in the Scriptures did before us, as many in life before us, can we see God's providence in our lives?

Light your candle as we pray together:

**All: Dear God, as we light this candle, shine the light of your hope into our hearts and into our world. Amen.**

Opening prayer

God our Father, we know that You love us as a Mother loves her child.  
We know that You care for us as a Father cares for His child.  
Today we pray for Your blessing on each one of us.  
Open our minds to the possibilities that these hours hold.  
Open our eyes to the wonder of this time.  
Open our hearts to the love of Your Spirit.  
May Your hand be with us, keeping us from hurt and harm.  
We ask this through Christ our Lord.



*God our Father, we know that You love us as a Mother loves her child.*

*We know that You care for us as a Father cares for His child.*

*Today we pray for Your blessing on each one of us.*

*Open our minds to the possibilities that these hours hold.*

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*Open our hearts to the love of Your Spirit.*

*May Your hand be with us, keeping us from hurt and harm.*

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Opening prayer

Jesus opened the eyes of the blind men. He knew that their hearts and minds were open to all that He had in store for them. As we open this space up to all that this time will bring, we open our hearts and minds too. We open the door of our hearts to welcome all who have come into this space. May we show Your love to one another!

All Bless us, O Lord

We open the window of our spirits to welcome the opportunities that will come our way. May Your Holy Spirit fill us with energy and joy!

All Bless us, O Lord



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We open the window of our spirits to welcome the opportunities that will come our way. May Your Holy Spirit fill us with energy and joy! **All: Bless us, O Lord**

We open our journals and look forward to all we will learn and understand so that we may see more clearly! **All: Bless us, O Lord**

We open our hands to all that we will do. May we use them to help one another! **All: Bless us, O Lord**

We open our lives to all that God has in store for us. May we always make room for God in our hearts! **All: Bless us, O Lord**

We open our eyes to one another. May we see clearly that each one of us is special and loved completely by God! **All: Bless us, O Lord**

### **Where have we been? Finding a way forward**

Physical or social distancing gave us a whole new way of interacting if the two-metre rule was to be observed. It gave us a new way of dealing with those ordinary everyday activities from shopping in our local store to using our free time in the local park. We had to engage in a new choreography of movement.

If we are to move on and learn from this global pandemic, we must take time to reflect. We all have a story to share, and your story is part of the Church's story as we move forward TOGETHER. As a Church we need to listen to that story and to try and understand something of the pain and joy that these months have brought us.

We need to learn something of our strength and ability to overcome something way outside our normal comfort zone

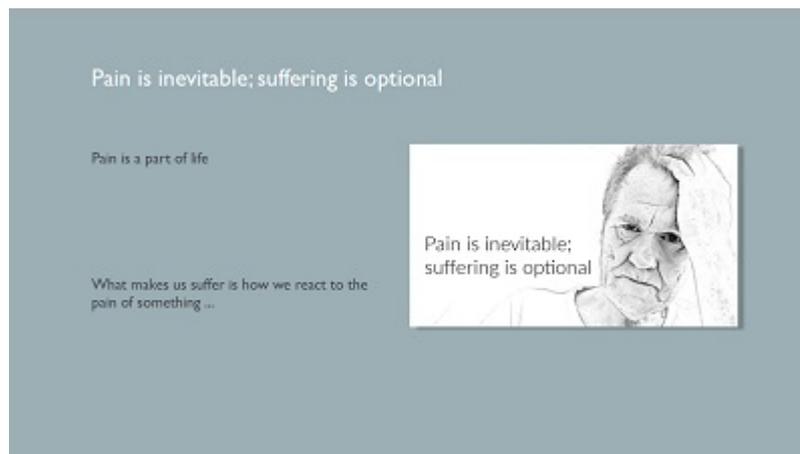
### **Learning from our experiences as a Church**

We relied on the internet to connect us to our worship and needed liturgical life. We were able to share so much but most of us, except the priest, were denied sharing Eucharist at these virtual masses. We were forced to share the experience of so many Catholics in the developing world: in the Amazon basin, for example, eucharistic famine in the norm.

### **How was that experience for you?**

Reflection and sharing: What were the positives? The negatives? What should we be taking forward with us?

### **Pain – and suffering**



'Pain is inevitable; suffering is optional' is an old Buddhist saying.

Pain is a part of life – physical pain – we twist our ankle, trap our finger, get sick; and emotional pain - those we love die, we become estranged from someone, we witness someone we care about going through their own pain. We love and we grieve. This is life.

But suffering is connected to what we do to ourselves. What makes us suffer is how we react to the pain of something: suffering happens because we do not, or cannot, let go of the hurt – a very human reaction.

### **What does God want from you?**

'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'

God want us to have family relationships; peace; care; love ; understanding ; a listening heart .

### **What God does NOT want**

In difficult times, we may need to remind ourselves that God does not want suffering and pain, misery, hunger or drought, racism, inequality or COVID 19.

What small things can each of us can do or change in our own lives that can make a difference? We have all done so much to prevent the spread of the pandemic: can we change how we shop to make

sure we are not contributing to workers being exploited, or to harming our common home? Can we gently tell friends when their jokes or comments are offensive?

What can you bring?

Take a few minutes to reflect ... write in your journal: what you can bring to yourself and to others?

### **We cannot dismiss our pain**



We have to acknowledge our pain – we cannot try to dismiss it. This will not prevent our suffering.

We cannot dismiss the pain of the past year. Where has your pain been?

While the impact of our worst experiences and losses will always be part of our lives, suffering arises when we buy into the false belief that our pain is permanent.

### **Take time to think**

Think of things that you have lost in the past – how do you feel about them now? How did you change your situation – or did you change it? What would you say to someone who is experiencing a similar loss? We are often much better at helping and advising others than we are at helping ourselves

### **Our fear of being hurt**

"The truth that many people never understand, until it is too late, is that the more you try to avoid suffering the more you suffer because smaller and more insignificant things begin to torture you in proportion to your fear of being hurt." — Thomas Merton

Some of us may even fear being hurt so much that we avoid opening ourselves to friendship and love.

Acknowledging our past pain can help us get our fear of being hurt into perspective.

Suffering is NOT what God wants from us. We are an Easter people, but we only achieve the joy of Easter through enduring the pain of Holy Week.

What do you want to reclaim in the near future?

Do not allow the pain and suffering of life define you. You are bigger than Covid-19.

Suffering occurs in response to thoughts such as: "Why me?!" "It isn't fair!" "This is horrible!" "I can't stand it!"

We need to change our mind set ... and look for the blessings and the positives

*This is the beginning of a letting go period.*

*I must begin to lay the foundation*

*For the good which lies ahead tomorrow.*

*Freeing my mind with positive thoughts - things not needed I'm letting go.*

*Closing an old door opening a new one for life*

### **Taking ownership of our response**

"We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

Viktor Frankl

The only thing that the Nazis were unable to take away from Victor Frankl was his choice as to how to respond to the deprivation, degradation, and trauma to which he was subjected. He made a conscious decision to focus his energies on "owning" that small but all-important space between the stimulus (whatever was said or done to him) and his response to it. His ability to retain that degree of psycho-spiritual autonomy in the most horrific circumstances imaginable provides a remarkable example of intrapersonal strength, grace under extreme duress, the power of personal choice, and the Serenity Prayer in action.

We pray together:

*The serenity prayer by Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971)*

**God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference.**

**Living one day at a time; enjoying one moment at a time; accepting hardships as the pathway to peace; taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it; trusting that He will make all things right if I surrender to His Will; that I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with Him forever in the next.**

**Amen.**

**The Serenity Prayer by Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971)**

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to accept the things I cannot change;  
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that I may be reasonably happy in this life  
and supremely happy with Him forever in the next.

Amen.



### **Who are we inspired by?**

We have our heroes in the Church such as Mary, Nano Nagle, Mary Mazzarello, John Paul II and Oscar Romero. We need these saints as guides and mentors, but, according to another great hero of the Church, Don Bosco, we are all called to sanctity. The challenge of lockdown probably tried your patience as we all had to learn to live without going OUT for work, school, recreation and worship. We have had to learn a new way of having to relate to people, especially those who are so close to us.

It is good to take time to reflect on who your heroes actually are. We need people to look up to, including from the world of sport, music or movies. We will probably never ever meet these people as they do not move in our circles but, perhaps during this lockdown, we came to rely more on them as we listened to their music, watch their films or shared their fitness tips. Our heroes, especially in these unusual times, remain as far away as ever, but they can still inspire and guide our dreams and ambitions. We need that sense of optimism as we have now begun that slow road to a new type of normality.

### **Everyday heroes**

However, we have been presented with a whole new category of champions, especially those in the frontline of medical care. Here in Britain, communities were united especially on a Thursday evening as we came out onto our doorsteps, fulfilling physical distancing to the letter, and clap for these carers.

The international lockdown has forced us to reassess what makes a hero: from the corner shopkeeper to refuse collectors; from farmers to pharmacists; from hospital cleaners to surgeons; from teachers to paramedic. You might know individuals who fall into this new hero category—thank them personally when you have the opportunity.

If this pandemic has helped us to show these people greater respect and care, then something positive can come in the new normal that will have to follow.

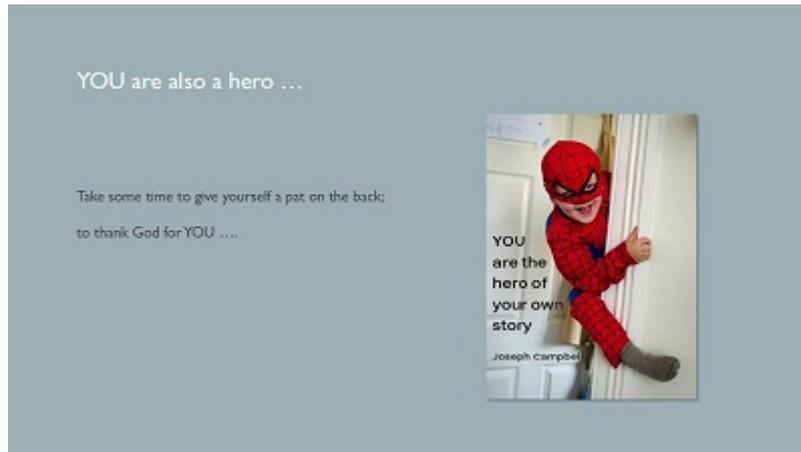
Pause for a moment and think of those whose efforts, during lockdown, made our life safer, easier and happier .

Think of these heroes today and always.

Take time now to reflect on those you are grateful for: partners, children, grandchildren, family friends, parishioners, colleagues... those who have walked the pilgrimage of life with you, without judgement, and have always been there for you.

Thank God for the gift of their lives in your life

**YOU are a hero ... Never forget that!**



Think of YOURSELF as a hero. You have come this far through this pandemic. You probably know the support you have been for people close to you, but there will be little things you have done that have brightened the days of others, and you may not even be aware of them: wave to the postie or a child passing by, a phone call or text to someone who really needed contact at that moment, a smile at a stranger. Never forget the good have you been and done so far.

Take some time to give yourself a pat on the back; to thank God for YOU....

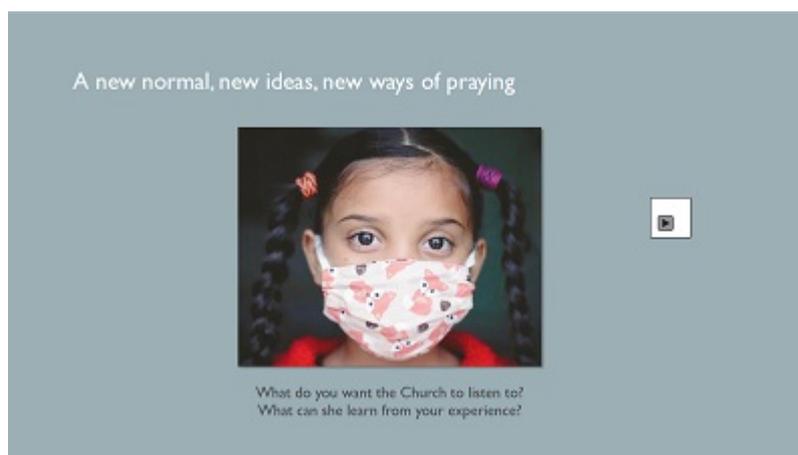
We can't deny we have all had wobbles, those temper tantrums, raised voices and words we should not have used. We are a community of reconciliation and so we have to forgive, and that includes forgiving ourselves, which is often the hardest, but we prolong our suffering if we can't do this..

**FATHER FORGIVE THEM ...**

Forgiveness lies at the centre of the Christian message; a forgiveness that reaches its climax in the message of Jesus from Calvary, in the face of hatred and bitterness from the baying crowds:

*Father forgive them, they do not know what they are doing.*

## A new normal; new ideas; new ways of praying



*Reflection by Fr Gerry O'Shaughnessy SDB:*

*Our experience of being Church has been totally upended during the experience of lockdown and, even now, as the new normal tries to kick in, your parish has been given pages of new health and safety regulations that must be adhered to. Schools might be OPEN, but you realise that it is different type of 'open' especially if you are a working parent. Churches are OPEN, but we must be open ourselves to new ways of being a Church community.*

*We are all part of the Body of Christ because we are the Eucharistic People of God. From our lockdown, we can bring new ideas and ways of praying to the table of our Parishes—I pray that our parish pastoral leadership will listen to that collective wisdom, from the youngest to the oldest. I would urge all parish pastoral councils and finance teams put this front and centre in their planning for the new normal-it needs to be an agenda item for the next twelve months at least. The Church has to listen to your experience of lockdown so that we can move forward together and, together, make a real difference.*

Take a moment and think about what you would like the Church to listen to. What can she learn from your experience?

### **Closing Ritual**

To begin, let us pause to recall past times when we have received ashes on our foreheads and heard the words: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

Can you remember how you felt hearing those words?

Have you ever stopped to think about the dust particles that you sometimes see, suspended in the air. They go unnoticed until sunlight bathes them in radiant streaming light and the specs sparkle. No one who cares about shiny furniture is unaware of what dust can accomplish just by being.

Nothing is insignificant in our universe.

In the beginning there was only darkness, emptiness. Then God said, Let there be Light and the Cosmos was born in a Great Radiance of brilliant light and boundless energy!

Our Solar System and everything in it developed from a shimmering cloud of stardust elements like calcium, carbon, and hydrogen resulting from a supernova explosion. After billions of years, thanks to the divine Mystery living and acting in our world and in us, stars formed and died in the process of bringing Earth to existence.

We became part of this blessed creation. We are connected to all life; we have a role in this sacred story! Thus we, too, are made of stardust elements. On Ash Wednesday, we Christians have traditionally receive a cross of ashes on our foreheads to remind us that we are dust BUT even before we are dust, we are stardust!

“Only when it is dark enough can you see the stars” -Martin Luther King, Jr.

We have to go through the darkness in order to see the beauty in life, like the star in the night sky. And we have been and are still going through darkness of this pandemic – but YOU are a star in that night.

*Born of a Star – Carolyn McDade*

*Return Return to the darkness, return this longest night of wonder*

*Return Return to the dream, return this holy night to ponder*

*Deep in the night, listen, listen Turn to the light waken, waken*

*Deep in the night turn to the light Waken to Sun's ancient summons ~*

*we who are born of a star who then are we?*

*we who are loved by a star who then love we?*

*We who are born of a star who then are we?*

We are the children of a loving God, who created us and our universe, and even in the darkness, we live in the light of Christ.

### **Our prayers of gratitude**

Sometimes we can forget to thank God for all he has done in and through our lives.

Think of every single blessing (even the small ones) that God has given you in your life. It might seem hard at first, but as you think about it, more and more will come to mind.

Praise God for all that is seriously good in your life.

Name the good you have enjoyed, and the people you are thankful for ...

We can go in peace to love and serve the Lord, and shine like stars.

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