
Easter in Latin-America's shrines: without the people but filled with faith and hope

Without the people. This caption describes some of the most visited world shrines in this Holy Week. These include the Marian sites of Latin America, the destination of uninterrupted pilgrimages. As many as 23 million faithful last year passed through the doors of the Basilica of **Our Lady of Guadalupe**, Patroness of Latin America, the most visited shrine in the world, even more than St. Peter's Basilica. About 10 million, according to some estimates, those who visited **Aparecida** in Brazil. But each country has its own Marian shrine, which is part of their history and identity: **Lujan** in Argentina, the Virgin of the Treinta y tres in Uruguay, **Caacupé** in Paraguay, **Chiquinquirá** in Colombia, **Coromoto** in Venezuela, the **Virgin of the Angels** in Costa Rica... and many more. *It's hard to imagine them without people, almost impossible. But it happens in this unprecedented Holy Week characterized by the presence of Covid-19 and the related restrictions on religious celebrations all over the world.* Yet the most important religious sites in the continent have endeavoured to prepare surprising answers and discoveries. **Continental consecration in Guadalupe, without the faithful.** On Easter Day, the faithful will not be present in the basilica of Guadalupe during the act of consecration of all of Latin America and the Caribbean to Her, also names the "Empress of the Americas." The initiative was taken by CELAM, the Latin American Episcopal Council representing all the bishops of the continent. "It marks a time in continuity with the history of Guadalupe - Monsignor **Eduardo Chávez**, canon of the basilica and a leading scholar and expert on the apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe, told SIR from Mexico City - The Holy Virgin appeared to Juan Diego, a lay peasant, in 1531, but immediately sent him to his bishop. Thereafter a bond was created that is renewed in this difficult moment." Of course, he conceded, "it will be an unprecedented Easter, but all the celebrations are broadcast and relayed by the media, on the Basilica's website and on social networks." Most importantly, the message that the Virgin sent to Guadalupe bears remarkable relevance: "Do not be afraid". This is the heart of the message: *"Mary does not leave us alone, she holds all her children in her heart, as she said to Juan Diego, under her cloak and in her arms.* It should not be forgotten that the Blessed Virgin of Guadalupe is pregnant, she carries Jesus within her. The same message is reiterated to us today," said the priest who in the last few days broadcast videos in various languages to remind the faithful of the link between Guadalupe and the Americas. **Prayers are equally offered in the sanctuaries of South America.** Our "journey" among the major shrines continues in Aparecida, Brazil, in the State of São Paulo. Here too websites and social networks broadcast Masses, prayers, and the liturgies of the Holy Week, as confirmed by the Rector, Father **Eduardo Catalfo**: "Large groups of faithful would normally arrive during Holy Week. *This year things are different, but we continue bringing the love of Our Lady of Aparecida to all families in various ways.*" There are also many messages, prayer requests that are "delivered" to the Shrine: "We are asked to pray for the health of everyone, family members, friends, especially doctors and health care workers," continues the rector, who concludes:

"I have no doubt that this will be a real Easter, of authentic faith.

The media help us transform every house into a veritable shrine, a shrine of the Word of God." Broadcasts on the website and social networks begin very early and continue throughout the day in Chiquinquirá, Colombia's national shrine. "The Rosary broadcast begins at 4:30 a.m., for our campesinos," said the rector, Dominican Father **Carlos Mario Alzate Montes**. "We are discovering the power of social networks," he explained, "we made some 'rehearsals' last year for the centenary of the proclamation of the image of the Holy Virgin as the Patroness of Colombia." Unfortunately, the basilica is currently shut down by government decree: "We hope to be able to celebrate Mass in the main church at least at Easter. In any case, *in the past few days I noticed that the religious aspect is*

proving to be fundamental for the people and that the families are turning out to be true domestic Churches. We try to be a living Church that is close to the faithful." In this regard, the shrine has also activated various helplines: "We are trying to accompany people, while another phone service offers support in ensuring humanitarian aid to the poor, to minors, to Venezuelan migrants. In agreement with the Municipality, we set up many solidarity initiatives."



Immagine non disponibile

Our journey ends in **Lujan**, Argentina's national Marian shrine, from where Father Lucas García, a member of the pastoral group of the basilica, told us: "It will be a special Easter. Good Friday was very important for us, with large popular participation. At Easter we will walk outside carrying a copy of the statue of the Holy Virgin to bless the people from afar. *The quarantine must be observed, but it's important to give a message of hope. This is what the faithful are asking us, calling for an end to the pandemic and praying for family members and doctors.* Many would like to enter the shrine, but it's not possible." In any case, the priest concluded, "I think that this Easter will awaken a desire for the faith and stir the hope inherent in the Easter season." **The power of the Sacred Image.** It's paradoxical," Uruguayan theologian **Maria del Pilar Silveira**, Professor at Boston University, told us at the end of this itinerary. "People's presence, touching the sacred images, is strongly connected to Latin American spirituality, to these sacred sites." The theologian's doctoral dissertation focused on the Marian shrines of Latin America, after filming them for eight years. She added: "I believe, however, that the great value that the people of Latin America attach to the sacred image plays an important role in this unprecedented situation." "In fact - she said - devotion to shrines extends to encompass families, the domestic Church. It was already happening before and now it's growing stronger. *It's a spirituality of lay people, who carry with them the images of the shrine and often create their own altar at home.* I have seen it often, for example in Venezuela". For Pilar Silveira, "in this way people manage to live the faith inside their homes, every day. This is happening also now that the churches are closed: *"But the faith," the theologian pointed out, "grows in the invisible realm, and this can be a time for renewal of ecclesial consciousness.* For example, parents become aware of their role in the transmission of the faith. We might witness the growth of a new form of participation of the laity."

Bruno Desidera