
Latin America: initiatives in memory of COVID-19 victims and to celebrate Easter in the family

Another Easter Mass without the presence of the faithful, or with limited participation, in many parts of Latin America. However, original initiatives have been organised to remember the victims of COVID-19 and to enhance family prayer. While twelve months ago it was virtually impossible to receive the Holy Eucharist throughout the continent, today the picture varies from one area to the next, *but in the best-case scenario attendance is considerably reduced almost everywhere*. Such is the case, for example, of Guadalupe, in Mexico City. In the world's major shrine, services can still be celebrated in the presence of the faithful, but with many restrictions and limited numbers, since Mexico's capital has been designated "orange" in the country's coronavirus alert system. Also in Chile, the bishops have asked and obtained that churches remain open, although very few are allowed to attend Holy Mass. Churches will remain open but with restrictions in Venezuela, Colombia and most of Argentina. Easter will be celebrated "in presence" in Manaus, capital of the Brazilian state of Amazonas, which in January and February experienced the world's most rapidly growing COVID-19 epidemic. But no in-presence faithful in most of Brazil, including the national shrine of Our Lady of Aparecida. In-presence Holy Mass was celebrated in Peru until Palm Sunday. There will be no faithful attending the Triduum and Resurrection Sunday celebrations. **The Brazilian variant is spreading.** Decisions are following the course of the pandemic. COVID-19 had only just hit the continent a year ago and was already spreading fast. In the months that followed, Latin America was to become the global epicentre of contagions. Then, in the fall, the US and Europe were once again gripped by the virus. *But now the "Brazilian variant" is rampant*. Especially in Brazil, with over 3,000 deaths a day in the last week and 80-90,000 daily infections. Also in Paraguay, Peru (another country hardly hit in the first wave), and Chile. There have been approximately 25 million confirmed infections and over 750,000 deaths throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. But it is feared that, like last year, the worst months are still to come, also given the slow pace of the vaccination programme. "We will live Holy Week following in the footsteps of our Master and Saviour, conscious of the limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, caring for the life of each of our brothers and sisters, a sacred gift, as a Church that celebrates, proclaims, prays in the family, welcomes and comforts", the **Brazilian bishops wrote** in a message released at the beginning of Holy Week. **Holy Week in Lima amidst "peripheries" and the family.** *In this situation, initiatives of solidarity, events in memory of the victims, Easter cards, using social networks and new technologies, ways to live Easter as a family, are being promoted at ecclesial level.* "These are glimmers of a new way of living the Church", Archbishop **Carlos Castillo Mattasoglio**, Primate of Peru, told SIR from Lima. The archdiocese of one of the largest cities in Latin America has been initiating a number of creative initiatives over the past few months, including during the current Holy Week, that combine outreach to the needy with prayers in the family, while putting videos and social networks to valuable use. For instance, past Friday's "Via Crucis of the peripheries" virtually united the different districts of the city and the many situations of distress. For this Holy Week, the archdiocese has proposed that some of the most meaningful rituals be experienced within the family. This suggestion was illustrated in videos posted on YouTube and Facebook. Msgr. Castrillo went on to describe initiatives promoted by the Archdiocese along with many others carried out throughout the Continent: "We decided to highlight the gestures of family participation, in view of the Year of St Joseph and the Year of Amoris Laetitia announced by Pope Francis, with the aim of increasing the missionary role of families. *These initiatives are part of a broader commitment of the Church, of each parish, seeking to prioritise the dialogue with the most vulnerable people living in isolation, to spread a culture of solidarity and care for life.* I was impressed by the close collaboration that developed with regard to the Caritas projects" In this clearly extra-ordinary context, given the "importance of the sacraments and of attending Mass, people understand that Christian life can be expressed in other ways, what I call sparks. We all know

that religiosity is cherished in our hearts and practised in everyday life. Reflecting on Holy Week, we recognise that many rituals can be lived in the family, from the washing of the feet to the adoration of the cross, to the readings of the Easter Vigil." **"Memorials" to COVID-19 victims.** During the past few months, the archdiocese of Lima also spearheaded the creation of "memorials" to remember those who died as a consequence of the pandemic. *On the occasion of Corpus Christi last year, the cathedral was literally 'covered' with almost six thousand photos of the victims, sent by their families.*

A few months later, on the night of 1 November, in an atmosphere of prayer and strong emotional impact, over ten thousand photos of dead Peruvians were projected onto the facade of the cathedral. Clearly, the intention was not to "sensationalise" the deaths of so many people, the Archbishop pointed out, but to "highlight what is good and pure in popular religiosity. In Peru, people always have photos of their family members in their pockets. On those days we saw an impressive choral response. Remembering means going to the heart of the person, and that's what we did. I chose to incense those photos and images; it meant remembering how important they had been to so many people, and reliving the gestures of Jesus, who 'touches' us and asks us to 'remember'. That is why I chose to incense and bless with water." In the last few months, more "memorials" have been created throughout the continent. The most recent was in the archdiocese of Olinda and Recife, in northeast Brazil. The Cathedral's century-old colonnade and walls display the photos of 500 deceased people, while the photos of health care workers line the walls of the church. The installation was blessed by the Archbishop, Dom Fernando Saburido. Prayers will also be offered in the coming days for the bishops (about 20 at present) and for the hundreds of priests, men and women religious who died from COVID-19 across the continent. (*) *journalist at "La Difesa del Popolo"*

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