

Pope calls for solidarity, debt forgiveness and ending sanctions in Easter message



Vatican City, April 12 (RHC)-- Pope Francis has called for solidarity across the world to confront the "epochal challenge" posed by the coronavirus pandemic, in his traditional Easter address on Sunday.

"The European Union is presently facing an epochal challenge, on which will depend not only its future but that of the whole world," said the 83-year-old pontiff addressing the world's 1.3 billion Catholics from an empty Saint Paul's Cathedral at a ceremony attended by just a handful of priests.

Pope Francis broke with centuries of tradition to livestream Easter Sunday mass to those suffering in the solitude of a coronavirus lockdown that forced the world's Catholics to improvise on their holiest day. He recalled that Europe rose again after World War II, "thanks to a concrete spirit of solidarity that enabled it to overcome the rivalries of the past."

"This is not a time for self-centredness, because the challenge we are facing is shared by all, without distinguishing between persons," he said. The pope urged political leaders, in particular, to give hope and opportunity to laid-off workers, and called for sanctions relief, debt forgiveness and ceasefires to calm conflicts and financial crises around the globe.

He also offered thanks and encouragement to doctors and nurses who have worked "to the point of exhaustion and not infrequently at the expense of their own health".

On Saturday, Pope Francis led an Easter eve mass in an empty St Peter's Basilica, and urged people to "not yield to fear" and focus on a "message of hope." The vigil, which normally takes place in a church packed with about 10,000 people, was closed to the public and attended by only about two dozen, including a few altar servers and a smaller-than-usual choir.

Because of the coronavirus outbreak, it was scaled back to eliminate several traditional features, such as the baptism of adult converts and a long procession up the main aisle of Christendom's largest church.

"Darkness and death do not have the last word," the pontiff said, referring to the outbreak. "Over these weeks, we have kept repeating, 'All will be well', clinging to the beauty of our humanity and allowing words of encouragement to rise up from our hearts. But as the days go by and fears grow, even the boldest hope can dissipate. "Let us not give in to resignation ... We can and must hope," Francis added at the vigil, which was livestreamed.

Francis himself has reportedly been tested twice for COVID-19 since coming down with a cold at the end of February. Rome and the rest of Italy have been living under forced confinement since early March due to the pandemic, whose official death toll has soared past 100,000.

The pope's virtual prayers are just the most vivid example of religious improvisation in the age of physical distancing and confinement. In countries around the world, Catholics followed the papal service or masses said by priests in their own empty churches and broadcast on television or over the internet.

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