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Dear brothers and sisters in the Lord,

I pray that our continued observance of Lent has been for you an opportunity of grace and deeper conversion as a disciple of our Lord Jesus Christ. Surely, you have noticed a stark change in the appearance of the church this weekend. The statues of the saints and angels, which beautifully adorn our church, have been covered with purple cloths. Likewise, the crucifixes that we normally see have been covered.

For some, this practice may be familiar; for others, it may be new. In either case, allow me to offer a brief explanation. The covering of statues and crucifixes during Lent is an ancient custom in the Church. One liturgist explains that it likely dates back to 9th century Germany, when, throughout the season of Lent, a large cloth would be used to veil the entire sanctuary of a church from the eyes of the congregation. This reminded the people that Lent is a time of penance during which we are separated from God until our reconciliation with Him is accomplished at Easter.

In our own day, this practice of veiling statues and crosses can deepen our experience of Lent by encouraging us to focus on what is most essential. Even the beautiful adornments of our church can distract us from what is to be primary in our worship, namely, the sacrifice of the Cross that is celebrated most powerfully in these last weeks of Lent and which is made present for us every time we participate in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Let us pray that removing some of the beauty which normally surrounds us will heighten our spiritual senses to recognize more fully the great love of Jesus Christ, who offers Himself for us on the altar of the Cross.

I also want to take this opportunity to offer thanks. First, I am extremely grateful to all those volunteers who worked so hard in our three parish fish fry dinners. They were hugely successful! In three nights, our parish served nearly 1,300 plates! I regret that I was only able to be present for the first of those three Fridays, but it was a great joy as pastor to see so many members of our parish gathered in fellowship and to see so many people from our neighborhood who may have no other experience of our parish community. Let us pray that our food, fellowship, and fun will draw many who are also looking for a life of faith.

Second, thank you for your prayers for me during my trip to Rome. As I mentioned at Masses on the weekend before I left, I had the blessed opportunity to take a “field trip” to Rome with a group from the School of Canon Law at the Catholic University of America. This trip gave us an opportunity to encounter up close many of the structures and governing offices of the Church that we had studied in the classroom.

The trip also had many great highlights. We were able to offer Mass in all four of the major papal basilicas: St. John Lateran, St. Paul Outside the Walls, St. Mary Major, and St. Peter. I had a unique opportunity to offer Holy Mass with a small group of priests at the Clementine altar of St. Peter's, which is the oldest altar in the basilica and the one located closest to the tomb where the bones of the apostle are buried. We also had the opportunity to meet with several bishops and archbishops and cardinals.

Finally, in a completely unexpected gift from the Lord, the Cardinal-Secretary of State was able to arrange for our group a private audience with Pope Francis. On Friday, March 9th, our last afternoon in Rome, we went to the Casa Sancta Marta, where Pope Francis lives. There our little group of 18 spent about 10 minutes alone with the Holy Father. It was such an amazing experience that it still seems a little surreal. It was a great blessing to be in his presence and to experience his joy as he joked and laughed with us. He offered a prayer and a blessing for us; and he begged us to pray for him, as he added, "I need it!"

I have added a couple of pictures to the end of this letter, but you can go to the photo albums section of our parish website (www.oler-nola.org/photoalbums) to see many more from the trip.

Again, thank you for your prayers for my safe travels and please know that I carried all of you in my heart during those special days in Rome.

To Jesus through Mary,



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