

From the Chapel – May 13: My present undertaking



[“From the Chapel”](#) is a series of short, daily reflections on life and faith in a time of uncertainty. As people across the world cope with the effects of the coronavirus – including the social isolation necessary to combat its spread – these reflections remind us of the hope that lies at the heart of the Gospel.

For the first time in the two months since I began “From the Chapel” on March 13, I scrapped a column today. Well, not totally scrapped: I filed those 300 words away, and I might use them someday in a different context. But today, over 30,000 words into these reflections on faith and life in the midst of a pandemic, those 300 words weren’t working for me.

I took a break to make supper – a delicious (if I may say so myself) pork paprikash – and eat it with my family, and then headed back out to my library to give this column one more shot. And as soon as I opened the door and my eyes fell on the crucifix on the opposite wall, I knew exactly what had happened, and why those 300 words just weren’t doing what I needed them to do.

For many years now – decades, actually – I’ve stood before a crucifix (or, lacking a crucifix, faced east) and prayed the same prayer before I sat down to write. It’s a prayer that I memorized sometime in the early 1990s, while I was in graduate school at The Catholic University of America. Amy and I were living in Vienna, Virginia, and were parishioners at Epiphany of Our Lord Byzantine Catholic Church in Annandale, Virginia. We were considering switching from the Roman to the Byzantine Ruthenian rite, and I was doing a deep dive into the history and liturgy of the Eastern churches.

In the neighborhood just across the Red Line Metro from Catholic U., there was an Eastern Catholic monastery with a splendid little bookstore. Over time, I bought several icons and various books, but the one that I treasure the most even today is a little slipcased volume called the Byzantine Book of Prayer.

It was in that volume that I found the prayer that I committed to memory and still recite today. Or rather, forgot to recite today, until I walked back into the library and my eyes fell on Christ hanging on the cross: "O Christ God, you have said with your holy lips, 'Without me, you can do nothing.' O Lord, I embrace your words with my heart and soul and bow before your goodness and say: Help me, your unworthy servant, to complete this, my present undertaking, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

Every writer has his habits, his little routines, that make the words flow. This column is called "From the Chapel" because I have found that sitting in the dark in OSV's chapel, in front of the Blessed Sacrament, helps concentrate my mind and reminds me that everything I write should be in the service of Our Lord. When I lose sight of that, as I did today, because meetings piled onto meetings and I wanted to get something – anything – written before supper with my family, the results are predictable. They may not be bad (again, I'll probably salvage those 300 words somehow), but they're entirely mine, not his. I do my best work when he works in me.

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