

Dear Friends,

I have been asked many, many questions in the last few days about the decisions made recently by the Archdiocese of Chicago to effectively close down parishes for the time being as this country grapples with dire predictions of the COVID-19 virus spreading all over the world. Hospital staffs are very concerned that they won't have enough equipment and personnel to treat the cases that may present themselves in the next few weeks, so it was felt by some in leadership that drastic measures need to be taken now to avoid that kind of doomsday scenario from becoming a reality.

Questions such as these have all been asked:

- "Why did this Archdiocese shut down when other dioceses remain open?"
- "Why can't we celebrate Masses with less than 250 people – like weekday Mass?"
- "What if we did an outdoor Mass with people driving by in their cars to receive communion?"
- "What if we celebrated Mass without Communion?"
- "Can a priest say a Mass in my home, even if I offer him dinner?" ☺
- "What about the possibility of doing 'underground' Masses, like in the apostles' time?"
- "When will Churches be re-opened?"
- "How am I supposed to be fed by the Eucharist?"

These questions and many more are excellent questions. I will not answer these questions now, though - partly because I don't have answers for all the questions yet and also because the purpose of this reflection is not to share more information, but to offer a spiritual perspective on all this. As we have been trying to resolve so many details in the last few days, we haven't had time to spiritually reflect on this crisis.

Is Satan at work in this? I certainly think so! How could Satan not be pleased when churches feel the need to close their doors and deny their people the Eucharist and Mass? When I was much younger, I discounted Satan's influence in the world. I came from the generation of people that were taught that an all loving God would not allow the devil to influence our lives. In fact, even though in my heart I knew evil was out there, my head told me that the idea of Satan was a fairly antiquated notion. That perspective changed for me in 1999 when I participated in a 30 day retreat based on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola. I had been at the retreat for about a week when I received an incredible urge to pack my bags and call it quits and return to Chicago from Los Altos, California. After much prayer, however, I determined the best path for me was to stay, even though it would have been much easier to go home. The last three weeks were a transformative experience for me and it wasn't until later on in the retreat that my wizened and wise spiritual director led me to re-visit the urge to leave and the devil's hand in that. For the first time in my life, I had a concrete experience of evil at work. I have been much more conscious of it ever since.

This pandemic we are struggling with has caused governments and the Church to take measures unheard of since the Spanish flu outbreak that killed an estimated 50 million people in 1918.

As Fr. Matt and I celebrated Mass publicly for the last time on Saturday morning, a lump formed in my throat as I realized this was the last time we would be celebrating the Eucharist as a community for perhaps a long time. How would people react to all this? Would they think of this as a "vacation" from Mass or would there be much sadness at the loss of this precious gift from our Lord? I hope it is more the latter rather than the former for the people of our parish. Certainly the questions I highlighted above have come from the depths of the souls of people who find it difficult to comprehend being cut off from the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist.

There is one perspective in all this that I think merits our consideration and prayer. Fr. Matt spoke about this in his homily on Saturday morning and I couldn't agree with him more – perhaps the absence of the Eucharist for now should be seen as a fast from the Eucharist - and what better time of year to consider this than the season of praying, fasting and abstaining – Lent?! What happens when we fast from those things we enjoy or love? Our hearts yearn for that which we fast from and our love for that becomes stronger. Maybe that is the silver lining in our inability to provide the Eucharist to you... through this fast from our Lord in the gift of his Body and Blood, we grow stronger in our love for him and we appreciate even more what a tremendous gift the Eucharist is for us, in which our bodies and souls are given what we need to face the world and overcome Satan's power. That is not to say we won't have the strength to overcome evil now, for we have the gift of faith and our baptism to do that, but how much more powerful are we with Jesus inside of us in his Eucharist?

Let me offer a few pieces of direction if I may:

- **Don't let this be a time of division and conflict in the Church.** I have no doubt that the Holy Spirit is at work in all of our religious leaders – from the Holy Father, to the bishops, priests and deacons. Even though different leaders within our Church are responding to this crisis in different ways, that doesn't necessarily mean one is right and the other is wrong. It just means that each is doing the best they can to lead well with faith, justice and compassion in light of all the information that is out there in order to conquer this dread disease. Division leads to isolation. We have enough of that already.
- **Continue to pray. Or pray even more.** Please pray for all people who have perished as a result of coronavirus, for those who are sickened by it and for all who fear it. Let's pray for our healthcare providers as they treat those who are ill and dying. Pray for our spiritual leaders, Pope Francis, Cardinal Cupich and all bishops, priests, deacons and the Little Sisters of the Poor as well as our President, Governor and all leaders of government. Pray for those who may lose their jobs and livelihood as the result of restrictions on people's ability to move about and congregate.
- **Be not afraid.** How many times did Jesus say that in his earthly ministry to his apostles, disciples, Jews and Gentiles? We know that the Lord is with us and we know that Jesus loves us unconditionally... not just in the good times, but especially in our moments of fear, anxiety and difficulty. The Lord is present to us abundantly right now. Let's seek that out and find comfort in it.
- **Let's love our neighbors as ourselves.** This kind of challenging situation brings out the best and worst in people. Allow this pandemic to allow you to be at your best. Check on those people who could use a little bit of help, whether they are in your circle of family and friends or not. Pay particular attention to our senior community who sometimes struggle with loneliness in the best of times. Isolation is good for no one. A simple gesture of care can mean so much. Please reach out to those whom you know could benefit from that.

I'd like to close with a prayer that His Holiness, Pope Francis shared at a Mass on March 10, in which he calls upon the intercession of the Blessed Mother in this health crisis:

***O Mary,  
you always shine on our path  
as a sign of salvation and of hope.  
We entrust ourselves to you, Health of the Sick,  
who at the cross took part in Jesus' pain, keeping your faith firm.  
You, Salvation of the Roman People,  
know what we need,  
and we are sure you will provide  
so that, as in Cana of Galilee,  
we may return to joy and to feasting  
after this time of trial.  
Help us, Mother of Divine Love,  
to conform to the will of the Father  
and to do as we are told by Jesus,  
who has taken upon himself our sufferings  
and carried our sorrows  
to lead us, through the cross,  
to the joy of the resurrection. Amen.  
Under your protection, we seek refuge, Holy Mother of God.  
Do not disdain the entreaties of we who are in trial, but deliver us from every danger,  
O glorious and blessed Virgin.  
Amen.***

Please be assured of the prayers of the priests at St. Theresa: Frs. Matt, Michael, Tom and me. We will continue to bring your intentions to prayer as we celebrate the Eucharist each day.

May God bless you all,  
Fr. Tim Fairman