

March 21, 2020
Third Saturday in Lent

Dear St. Paul and St. Mark parishioners,

I was debating between writing very much or writing nothing, so I have decided to compromise and write something.

There has been a deluge of information, mandates (both from the state and the Archdiocese), memos, and decisions in the past week which have together resulted in a very significant change to our social structures. These changes have impacted nearly every aspect of life, from work, to social and family life, and to religious expression. It is important to clarify a few points which you may not know.

First, our offices at St. Paul and St. Mark are closed indefinitely, and all workers and priests in the Archdiocese are expected to conform to the work and social guidelines provided by the Department of Health. At this time, employees of the Church may do some work for their parish, but this must be done “in a safe and *limited way*”, and their work is only “to perform the most essential functions and to attend to routine maintenance” (per an Archdiocesan memo). Therefore, this is not the time for great projects and new endeavors in the office; it is a time of routine maintenance and only the most essential functions. All employees in the Archdiocese are being paid their full benefits during this indefinite period, including our employees at St. Paul and St. Mark. We have been blessed with good financial stewardship at both parishes, and we can run them both for several months without any financial contributions by the faithful, but I do encourage you all to continue with your weekly or monthly contributions as you are able.

Second, the sacramental duties of the priest are limited only to cases when a person is in danger of death. This means that the priest is *not* to drive to the home of healthy parishioners and deliver the Eucharist; the priest is *not* to sit in the Church or in a car and hear numerous confessions; the priest should *not* be going out to anoint someone with a minor fever. The priests of our Archdiocese are asked only to provide the Sacraments if the person is in a real danger of death; furthermore, if and when someone has died, the funeral is to be either delayed or greatly restricted. Just this past week, a beloved priest in our diocese died suddenly (Fr. Rick Eldred, who was serving as the pastor of two parishes in the Bloomington deanery), but no other priest is invited to Fr. Rick’s funeral, and neither are any of his parishioners. His funeral will only involve immediate family members and the Bishop, which is a drastic change from any other priest funeral in the past. This is just one example of what Sacraments look like in our current situation, and that is what any other funeral in our diocese will look like for the next few months. Regarding the mass itself, priests in our diocese have been asked to say one mass per day, including Sundays; therefore, the current plan is that I will only say one mass on Sunday, and it will be said in my private chapel at 10am and streamed online.

Third, it seems relevant to point out that, in general, the restrictions on both civil and religious institutions are increasing around the world, both in duration and in magnitude. This means

that we should expect stricter policies in the coming weeks, and we should expect these policies to last longer than initially told. This is already true of our Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese: originally, they were closed until April 5th, but that has already been extended to May 1. Similar increases in the duration of social distancing, and the strict protocols and enforcement of this physical and social distancing, are very likely for all of us in Perry County.

Finally, I must say that I am supportive of these changes, primarily because of the mathematics involved. Looking at the growth rate of the virus, and the rate at which it is able to kill, we are in a critical time of limiting its exponential growth, and there is real hope that these measures will help curb that lethal growth. But this is not my primary source of our hope, and these other sources of hope are the real reason for me writing to you today.

The most important teaching of the Catholic Church which I desire all of us to embrace, as a source of hope, is the truth that God is all-powerful, which means that nothing can happen in this world without His permission. There is a moral consequence which flows from this great theological truth, and it is that we must train ourselves to accept all things as if they came from the very hand of God. Saint Paul wrote about this beautifully in his letters, saying “In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 5:18). Paul tells us that, in *all* circumstances, we are to give thanks, for it is the will of God for us to endure and experience whatever it is that comes our way. God is with us in this pandemic, and His will is intimately involved in all that we are experiencing and all that is unfolding. This is a mystery which I do not hope to solve, but I would like to share with you some sources of gratitude in my own life which have come about with these changes.

First, I have enjoyed the deeper silence and increased isolation which I have experienced in the past week. I am named after Saint Anthony, who spent many years of his life as a hermit alone in the desert, and I have always wanted to live a life like Saint Anthony; well, in this past week, my wish has been granted! God has blessed me abundantly by allowing me to experience long hours of quiet and stillness, even amid the constant email, social media, and text messages that I have received and sent. In the coming weeks, especially leading up to Easter, it is my intention to enter more and more into this obscure, hidden, and shadowy blessing which has come under the name of “social distancing”.

Although I give thanks for this blessing, it has not been without its crosses. There have been some periods of boredom, fear, doubt, and confusion, but God’s light continues to shine in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. Every cross given has also come with a corresponding grace to carry it, and there are many friendships and relationships which have been a source of renewal right when I needed it, especially my relationship with God. Through these graces, I continue to believe what I have always experienced and what Saint Paul taught: ***everything that has happened in my life has been a blessing for which I am thankful***, including this current pandemic. Thus my ultimate source of hope does not lie in sociological or medical strategies; my hope lies in the Providence of God who is always at work in the world as a Healer and a Savior,

bringing to fulfillment His all-powerful Plan because of promises he made to our ancestors. And he is a God who always keeps his promises.

Besides this theological truth about God's omnipotence, and the corresponding moral obligation to trust this omnipotence, I also want to clarify what the Catholic Church expects of you at this time.

Regarding the mass, you all have been dispensed of your obligation to *attend* Sunday mass, but also know that you are dispensed from *watching* mass. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that, when a person is not able to attend the Sunday Eucharist, "it is specially recommended that the faithful take part in the Liturgy of the Word...or engage in prayer for an appropriate amount of time personally or in a family..." (CCC 2183). There were times in my life when I could not get to mass, and in those times, I never watched the mass to "make up" for missing the mass; in fact, there is really nothing I can do to "make up" for it. Again, this is taught by the Church, which states, "You *cannot* pray at home as at church, where there is a great multitude, where exclamations are cried out to God as from one great heart, and where there is something more: the union of minds, the accord of souls, the bond of charity, the prayers of the priests" (CCC 2179). There is simply no substitute for the reception of the Eucharist while gathered with others at Church, and when we have a serious reason which makes such a gathering impossible, we are immediately released of the obligation to attend or watch such a mass, and instead are encouraged to supplement it with some fitting (but not equal) devotion.

In light of this dispensation from the obligation to attend Sunday mass, the diocese has asked all the faithful to make an act of spiritual communion in order to remain spiritually connected. This is a very real practice within the Church, and it is of great efficacy; in fact, it has been practiced by many Catholics who, over the centuries, were not able to receive Holy Communion. One of my favorite examples is Fr. Walter Cizek, who spent six years in a soviet prison without bread or wine to say mass. During this time, he made several acts of spiritual communion each day by praying a rosary, and although he longed for the mass, he found great consolation in these daily rosaries. This beautiful devotional practice has been the tool of Saints through the centuries to stay united with Christ when Sacramental Communion was impossible, and I want to encourage you all to make it part of your spiritual communion. ***Outside the reception of Holy Communion, there is no better instrument for peace, no greater expression of filial and communal devotion, no greater aid to those in need, and no more frequent prayer found on the lips of the Saints than the Holy Rosary.*** If you desire to fulfill the request of Archbishop Thompson to make an act of spiritual communion each day, there is no more perfect completion of that request than to begin praying the rosary every day.

When you are making an act of spiritual communion, the diocese has given us some words to use, and I invite you to say these words if they aid you in any way:

My Jesus, I believe that You are present in the Most Holy Sacrament. I love You above all things, and I desire to receive You into my soul. Since I cannot at this moment receive You

sacramentally, come at least spiritually into my heart. I embrace You as if You were already there and unite myself wholly to You. Never permit me to be separated from You. Amen.

However you make an act of spiritual communion, know that it is very real and very important, and the Holy Spirit is interceding for you to help you. Although the Church teaches that you “cannot pray at home as you pray at Church,” ***I invite every person in our parish to pray to the Holy Spirit and ask for His guidance to help you make an act of spiritual communion which is appropriate to your current situation.*** The Holy Spirit will answer this prayer.

Besides the need to make some act of spiritual communion, the whole world of moral obligations remain a part of our daily life, the greatest of which is “to Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:29-31). There is no disease, no pandemic, and no situation which relieves us of the obligation (and the blessing!) to be people whose very lives diffuse the scent of divine and human love. At the end of the day, the most important thing is not attending mass but rather *living* the mass, and it is always possible to live in our very bodies the love of the one whose Sacrifice we commemorate at every mass. Even outside of this current pandemic, most Catholics do not become holy by attending (or watching) daily mass; they become holy by surrendering to the will of God, which often looks like getting up early to go to work, taking care of children when they are sick or need help, and never having a moment to yourself. The summit of the mass is found in Christ’s words “This is my Body, given up for you,” and we always have the opportunity to *live* these words, even when we cannot get to mass to hear these words or to receive the Sacrament which they effect.

It is a great privilege for me, as a priest, to offer up mass every day for the intentions of our community, and I believe that the Father hears these prayers and responds to them in accord with His Divine Providence. Trusting in this great love of the Father who is Providentially watching over us to lead us and “guide us in all our ways” (Psalm 91:11), I remain full of gratitude.

With prayers,

Fr. Tony