

FUNDAMENTAL LESSONS FROM THE 2020 CORONAVIRUS

➤ A reflection on our spiritual growth ➤

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As our nation works its way through the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, during which our lives were turned upside down and we lived in a way radically different from that to which we were accustomed as a community of faith, we should take a moment to pause and think about all that has occurred, what we have learned and what we should do now.

Never in our lifetime has the functioning of society been altered to the degree that we have seen over the last several months. Having devoted my entire priestly life to bringing the sacraments to the faithful, I never would have imagined the need to suspend public celebration of the Mass, limit access to our churches, and close our Catholic schools. My entire priestly life has been devoted to the opposite of those actions. I want more people to come to Mass each week and each day. I want us to rejoice in the Lord in close proximity to one another, rather than intentionally keep distance. I want more children to visit our schools and benefit from a Catholic education. Unfortunately, the circumstances of the coronavirus gave us little choice. To be compassionate to those who would suffer most from the disease, and to avoid its rapid spread, we had to take drastic actions. The good news is that those actions were effective, and as a people of faith, we have grown.

No matter how enthusiastic we are to return to life the way it was before, we must acknowledge that we are different. No society that endures a global pandemic is the same, even if it was managed as well as possible. Our lives have changed, and thus our experience of our faith has, as well.

In this message, I hope to reflect with you upon what we have learned from these last several months and how we should apply those lessons moving forward.

SPIRITUAL SACRIFICES

We have made physical, emotional, financial, and spiritual sacrifices throughout this pandemic. Initially, our liturgies were interrupted with the suspension of the Sign of Peace and the distribution of the Precious Blood. Eventually, as you know all too well, I was faced with the painful decision to suspend the public celebration of the Mass, postpone Confirmations, First Communions, group Baptisms, cancel high school Baccalaureate Masses and graduations, and many other important liturgies and events.

No matter what we have sacrificed in order to be compassionate to those who could get sick or die as a result of the virus, we have continued to yearn to be together and receive our eucharistic Lord. This, in and of itself, is a powerful witness of love and faith. We all share in the sacrifice required of a unified community of faith, even sacrificing what the fathers of the Second Vatican Council taught



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is the “source and summit of the Christian life,” namely, “taking part in the Eucharistic sacrifice” (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, no. 10, and Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, no. 11).

During this time, we are learning that our sacrifices must be rooted in faithfulness and love. Otherwise, our sacrifices are nothing but drudgery and frustration. We learn never to be complacent and are reminded that the public celebration of the Mass must be profoundly appreciated each and every time we participate. In the words of St. John Paul II, “It is more necessary than ever for all the faithful to move from a faith of habit, sustained perhaps by social context alone, to a faith which is conscious and personally lived. The renewal of faith will always be the best way to lead others to the Truth that is Christ” (Ecclesia in America, no. 73).

God chose the Eucharist as a means to unite us to him deeply and richly. That should not be taken to mean the Eucharist is the only way God can reach us. Indeed, the same fathers of Vatican II who called the Eucharist “source and summit” also recognized that “the sacred liturgy does not exhaust the entire activity of the Church” (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, no. 9). Even amid spiritual pain, we must remember that Jesus, although fully present in the Blessed Sacrament, is not bound by the Eucharist. In times when the Sacrament is impossible to receive sacramentally, we know with the certainty of faith that through the outpouring of the Spirit in abundance, we remain one Body in Christ. Jesus transcends the obstacles in our way and unites us in himself.

Perhaps the greatest lesson of this pandemic is that we must have faith and know that circumstances in which great evil occurs — such as disease, war, or coercion — will not bar us from a fulfilling and unitive relationship with God.

THE DOMESTIC CHURCH

Through the shutdown of our economy and society, families — the domestic church — have been brought together in ways we could have never imagined. Despite the many ways in which families have struggled emotionally, financially, and even spiritually at times, they have flourished through this experience. Routine family dinners happened where they never or rarely occurred before. Husbands and wives have spent time together that was previously occupied with commuting and juggling extracurricular activities. Siblings who had grown apart have spent time together, rekindling friendships. College students are experiencing the wisdom of their parents in ways only made possible by the distance created in college life. Look at what happens when we spend time together and listen to one another!

The domestic sanctuary of the Church is where families pray together to God. Time spent together has provided more opportunities to read Sacred Scripture, to offer thanksgiving at shared meals, and to participate together in acts of devotion, and even to celebrate the Church’s liturgy in Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer and Night Prayer.

In this prayer and in being together, we are reminded to look up to God and not focus solely on the problems in front of us. We are made for community, and it is that community that helps us refocus on what is really important and view our circumstances from a different perspective. Families have one another to lean on when they feel depressed or frustrated. These close relationships are how we are reminded to entrust our fears and worries to God.

Within families, parents have been called upon to live out the domestic church and serve their children

in unexpected ways. While some parents choose to educate their children at home, many partner with a school to assist them in the education of their children. Now, all parents have found themselves “homeschooling” in unique and atypical conditions. They have risen to the challenge and through their tireless efforts, assisted by professional educators and curriculums, have ensured that their children continue to learn and grow in knowledge, maturity, and most importantly, faith.

“And know that I am with you always, until the end of the world.”

Matthew 28:20

For those suddenly in a position to teach their children one on one, day in and day out, this has been quite a challenge, especially since both parents may also be teleworking. Parents, please know that I stand in admiration of your steadfast devotion to the education of your children, rooted in faith, which is an inspiring work of evangelization.

While destructive in many ways, the coronavirus has reminded us of the indispensable role parents play as the first and most important educators of their children, especially in the ways of faith.

No matter what children remember of what their parents taught them, the greatest lesson learned is that they are loved and cherished. This is perhaps the most fundamental lesson any child needs to understand, as this is the foundation for their academic, emotional, and spiritual growth. That love and care is an extension of the pastoral care that emanates directly from the mind and heart of God.

The domestic church is alive and thriving throughout this pandemic. Families do not merely exist through the challenges of the past several months. Through the grace and mercy of Our Lord, they have taken ownership as the domestic church, ensuring that each person grows and that the family grows together. What a beautiful witness of the Christian life!

CREATIVITY AND FELLOWSHIP

Immediately following the suspension of public celebrations of Mass, the priests of our diocese responded in new and creative ways. Through social media and livestreaming, they strived to bring the Mass to the faithful. While never a replacement for full participation in Mass, prayerfully uniting to the celebration of Mass with the help of media is a beautiful gift.

Additionally, priests have engaged social media to teach the truths of our faith, to communicate with their parishioners, to inspire them, and to inform them about important news that otherwise might have been shared through more traditional means.

Allow me this opportunity to express deep and sincere appreciation for the hard and continuous work of our priests, deacons, and men and women religious. Their love for the faithful and constant devotion to meeting their parishioners’ spiritual needs are simply remarkable. Their creativity and adaptability to the changing circumstances of the coronavirus have also been fascinating to witness. St. John Paul II said, “Look to the future with commitment to a New Evangelization, one that is new in its ardor, new in its methods, and new in its expression.” Our priests, deacons and men and women religious have epitomized this commitment to the New Evangelization. The creativity of the Church has also been master-

fully expressed by the faithful. Spending but a few minutes on social media quickly makes it apparent that the faithful, while confined to their homes, have been incredibly innovative in their efforts to remain positive and hopeful, as well as diligent in using every opportunity to share the Gospel, educate their children, teach the faith, and connect with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.

That connection has been beautifully illustrated in outreach to those who are homebound or otherwise live alone. The burden

of those living alone is often overlooked in our society and even, at times, within our Church. I rejoice in hearing one story after another of priests and lay faithful of our diocese calling or video-conferencing with those who live alone to see how they are doing and ask if they need help or special prayers. Only Our Lord can use the isolation of a stay-at-home experience to inspire Catholics to reach out to the lonely. These good people are living out the Gospel in unique and powerful ways.

Even after the coronavirus pandemic, I encourage you to continue to consider the lonely. Think of someone you know who has nobody to look after them and give them a call. Let them hear your voice and know that they are loved. A few minutes of conversation can lift one’s spirits in immeasurable ways.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis wrote, “The Lord wants to make use of us as living, free and creative beings who let his word enter their own hearts before then passing it on to others.” I have been inspired and overjoyed by the ways the faithful have been creative in taking the joy that is theirs in Christ and sharing it with their contacts in modern media.

SERVICE TO THE POOR IN ALL TIMES

One of the most negatively affected demographics throughout this pandemic has been the poor. Many of the job losses have occurred among those industries that employ individuals with lower incomes. Those who were barely staying above the poverty line were immediately in desperate need, and those who were already facing incredible financial hardship found themselves in an even worse situation, with little sign of hope.



Within that bleak reality shined a light of charity and generosity that, as a bishop, makes me proud beyond belief. Volunteers stepped up to help serve those in need of food, medicine, emergency assistance, and other essentials. Many donors stepped forward to increase their giving in order to buffer against the onslaught of needs facing our many charities and ministries. Staff worked around the clock, with little rest, to ensure that those who need us feel the love of God shine on their faces in this dark hour.

Pope Francis once referred to the poor as the “treasure of the Church” and stated, “How beautiful it would be if the poor could occupy in our hearts the place they have in the heart of God! Standing with the poor, serving the poor, we see things as Jesus does; we see what remains and what passes away” (Homily for World Day of the Poor 2019). In the face of each person desperately waiting for a bag of groceries or the chance to receive telemedicine is Jesus Christ himself. In the voice of every mother or father calling Catholic Charities because they have no way to pay their monthly rent is the voice of Christ saying, “Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me” (Mt 25:40).

With great joy and paternal pride, I can tell you that the faithful of this diocese have risen to the occasion and responded to the call to serve the least of God’s children. It is my prayer that, as a community of faith, we may increase our support of, and service to, the poor and vulnerable in our midst.

MY HOPE FOR YOU, THE FAITHFUL

Not merely to survive through this pandemic, but to thrive, requires patience and compassion for our families, for our friends, and for those in our communities, especially those who continue to suffer and die from COVID-19. Patience will be required of us going forward as well. This is not the last crisis we will face as a nation or as a Church. In such stressful moments, we must turn to Our Blessed Mother for direction and help. Nobody can lead us to Jesus quite like Our Mother. In times of frustration and impatience, call upon her gentle and steady guidance. For she will undoubtedly calm your restless heart and bring you to her son, Our Savior.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, I pray all of us are together again soon, especially around the eucharistic table. I look forward to visiting our parishes, schools, ministries, and hosting diocesan events. Being in your company is a profound source of energy and happiness for me as I carry out my ministry as your bishop.

As we wait with anticipation for the end of this pandemic, let us do so with profound faith and joyful hope, as well as the consolation of lessons learned. We must not simply move on from all that has occurred. We know that, through Christ Jesus, every struggle can be converted to a blessing that helps us grow in faith and virtue.

May we continue to work together and fortify the spiritual lives of our families, deepen our relationship with God, help those in need, and use creative opportunities to bring the joy and truth of the Gospel to others.

Prayerfully traveling this journey together, may we, with eyes raised to heaven, always walk humbly with Our God.