Q2. How can I make sense of what we’re being asked to give up right now? What does practicing the faith look like if we can’t come together, especially for Mass, this Lent?

A2. To go without the Eucharist is hard, even painful. This is a gut-wrenching Lenten fast. Especially because – for many of us – the threat of COVID-19 seems so unreal, so far away.

It isn’t.

There are those who want to say this is just like a bad cold or the flu. It isn’t. There are those who say it’s no big deal if a lot of people get it. It is. There are even some people who say this is all made up, or part of some conspiracy. It isn’t.

But to see how big a deal it is, we need to change how we look at things.

When we think of infections like the flu, we get how to keep ourselves from getting sick... or getting those around us sick. We cover our coughs. We wash our hands. We stay home if we have a fever. We get our flu shot. All very good things to do.

In a typical flu season, between past infections and getting the flu shot, a lot of people have some or full immunity. So the flu virus can’t spread as readily. Still, each year, millions get sick and thousands die.

But the spread of a new virus is different.

With a new virus, no one is immune. That means a lot of people will get sick. Of those, a certain percentage... 20% by latest estimates... will have more severe disease. Those at highest risk are the elderly (> 60) and the medically frail (those with heart or lung disease, diabetes, those with weakened immune systems).

If a few people get sick, that’s bad enough. The problem is that if we do nothing, a lot of people will get sick. And that means a lot of people will get sick enough to need to be in a hospital, in an ICU, or even on a ventilator (machine to breathe for them).

Given what we know about the virus, and that changes quickly, we are talking about 10s of millions of people sick and millions needing to be in the hospital—including almost 2 million who will need to be in an ICU (half of which will need ventilators). An estimated half-a-million people will die.

There are only 924,000 hospital beds and around 70,000 adult ICU beds in this country.

So, with a lot of people getting sick, our hospitals, ERs, and clinics will be stressed (and don’t forget – it’s not just a “health care system” – these are people we are talking about... people who are putting their health and even their lives on the line for us). They are already facing issues of shortages of critical supplies, making their work more dangerous. As is already happening elsewhere, we need to be ready for the very real possibility that not everyone will get the care they need if things don’t change.

So, when it comes to adjusting our lives – even the kind of disruption that the closing of schools and cancelling of gatherings (including Mass) might bring – we do so to slow down the epidemic, spreading it out over time so fewer people are sick all at once. So the most vulnerable among us are protected. That’s a Christian virtue, no?

So we have to think in a completely different way.
We need to start thinking about our society as a whole, and the risk to our health care system. That’s a big shift for most of us to make, but it is essential. It is essential for those in health care and for the critically ill. It is essential for all of us, if we ever need a doctor or emergency room or hospital bed.

Which brings us to the changes that we’ve made. The whole idea now is to slow the spread of the virus in our communities. Even if you think you don’t have anyone infected in your town, or even parish, you probably do. The latest estimate is that there may be 5 to 10 people with undetected coronavirus infections for every person that we know is infected.

We slow things down by what is called “social distancing.”

That means limiting contact with people in terms of distance from one another, the number of people that can be in one place at any given time, and how much time people spend together. We stay home unless absolutely necessary. This is especially important for those who are more likely to get very sick if they catch this virus.

What does this do? This “flattens the curve” – it spreads out the number of people who are going to get sick over a longer period of time, so fewer people are sick at any one time.

That’s why we’re not celebrating Mass together. That’s why we’re limiting the number of people that can be present for baptisms, weddings, and funerals — and celebrating those outside of Mass. That’s why we’ve closed schools and faith formation programs, and limited the number of people that can be in the same place at the same time.

“Social distancing” is not “spiritual distancing.” We are called to care for one another, now more than ever. Part of that caring is being spiritually close to each other. To have to be apart from one another right now – for the sake of one another – does NOT mean that we should ignore one another. What are some things we can do?
Lent calls us to be a people of prayer. So, in this time of absence from the celebration of the Sacraments as a gathered community, we go into our own inner rooms to pray. We quiet ourselves, and spend time with the Scriptures. We pray for and with one another. There are many electronic resources available (see: https://www.davenportdiocese.org/flu).

Priests have been encouraged to make themselves available for confessions and, if needed, the anointing of the sick. And, of course, they have been asked to celebrate Mass for all of us.

Lent calls us to almsgiving. Which means, even in our own anxiety and our own sense of loss, we need to keep in mind those who will suffer greatly in this pandemic. There are those who have no safety net, no safe home where they can ride out the storm, who live from paycheck to paycheck and must now do without. So please support the church and all others who are accompanying the most vulnerable at this time. And please do not hoard. Buy what you need; buy for others who also need but can’t shop for themselves; leave necessities for others as well.

Lent calls us to fasting. Yes, this is not the fasting we are used to; but we can embrace it in solidarity with those who are suffering here and around the world, who in this crisis lack even basic necessities. Who are afraid. We can fast, too, from spreading conspiracy theories and false information. And especially from scapegoating: this isn’t a Chinese virus or a foreign virus. It knows no borders.

This is not the Lent we expected when ashes were smeared on our foreheads in what seems forever ago, and in a different world. But it is the Lent in which we find ourselves.

In Lent, we remember how Christ gave his life for us. To love is to die. So we are being called to die to what is familiar, comfortable, even precious. We are being called to do so for the sake of, for the love of, others: those who are most susceptible to this infection, and for those who will suffer as health care and other resources become scarce, and as this pandemic takes its toll financially and socially. But our faith tells us that Easter follows Lent. To love is to die, but to die is to live. That’s the message of the Cross, which we—all of us, together—are being called to embrace in a profoundly deep way this Lent.