

Aging Gracefully during the Pandemic

Session 1: Fear and Trust

Opening Prayer

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace
Where there is hatred, let me sow love
Where there is injury, pardon
Where there is doubt, faith
Where there is despair, hope
Where there is darkness, light
And where there is sadness, joy

O Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek

to be consoled as to console
To be understood, as to understand
To be loved, as to love

For it is in giving that we receive
And it's in pardoning that we are pardoned
And it's in dying that we are born to Eternal Life
Amen.

Nothing to Fear Except Fear Itself

Read the talking points throughout this process aloud. Simply have each participant read one paragraph at a time out loud, continuing around the circle.

- One of my earliest memories was a phone call announcing to my family that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. It was Dec. 7th, 1941. The news that we were suddenly at war shocked us. We were anxious and afraid, not knowing what was ahead. We gathered around the radio to hear Franklin Delano Roosevelt tell the nation that we were at war with Japan and Germany, hearing: "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."
- Eventually, I came to understand what he meant. FDR was concerned that our people would not only be afraid, but actually be so locked in fear that we would not have the courage to face the horrors of war. We now had to face our fears with strength and the determination to fight this war on two fronts.
- In recent years, we have become enveloped in new fears. Our children are not safe in schools and have to endure practice drills in case of gun violence. The horrors of 9/11 brought us to our knees. We have been living in a culture of fear and this has sometimes alienated us from those who are different from us.
- **Our newest fear.** A few months ago we did not know about the coronavirus. Suddenly, it was moving throughout the world. As elders, we were informed that we were the most vulnerable, especially those in nursing homes. We were told to "shelter in place," avoid crowds, wear masks, wash our hands often, and not touch our faces.
- In our wildest imaginings, we never expected to observe Pope Francis extending his blessing to the world or praying the Stations of the Cross in an empty Vatican Square. Streets appear uninhabited throughout the world. Ambulances rush to over-filled and makeshift hospitals. Nurses and doctors are exhausted and getting sick themselves. Mass burials replace funerals. Our churches are empty. Parks and beaches are closed. It is all very frightening.

- **We are called to become beacons.** As elders, we have the experience, toughness, and wisdom to demonstrate coping skills during this unprecedented time. Some of us have lived through the Great Depression, not to mention a World War and multiple other regional wars. We know that courage and tenacity are indispensable. Although this new pandemic may have shaken us, our faith has been tested and strengthened through many losses and challenges over the decades. We have grown in empathy through the years, so that others can turn to us in their suffering and confusion. We can assist them in gaining perspective, and help them to call forth their own resilient and courageous natures to get through this period of uncertainty and anguish.
- **We are elder disciples.** We have been disciples for a long time and have walked with Jesus for many years. He has taught us what it means to

fully love our God in good times and bad. He has shown us how to love others, especially the least of our brothers and sisters. Jesus has taught us how to love ourselves, including our flawed and imperfect natures. We have learned to repent and to accept God's forgiveness.

- We are not perfect disciples with perfect prayer lives, but over many years we have learned to pray, to sit silently in meditation, to enjoy the wonders of our grandchildren at play, to listen to the struggle of our teens, to reach out to our adult children without being preachy or judgmental. We have learned that life can be sacramental and to experience God's presence in nature and music. Life experience has imbued us with insight and wisdom. We have much to share and contribute to a suffering world, even while we may be suffering during this time too.

Reflection Questions

- ① What are your fears during the pandemic?
- ② What has helped you when you were faced with a frightening experience in the past?

- ③ How can your faith enable you to be a beacon for others at this time?

Facing Fears

- As elders, and so some of the more "vulnerable" people during this pandemic, the prospect of death may be more immediate to us. With it may come a greater fear of death. We may also find ourselves grieving the thought of leaving our cherished loved ones and friends. We long to see our grandchildren grow up and bring their own children into the world. We anticipate future holidays and special occasions gathered together with family and friends. We don't want this to be the end yet.
- Yet we are Easter people! We believe in life everlasting, and reunion with loved ones who went before us. Imagine the great reunions! "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard...." As I once told a young,

dying atheist in my hospice ministry, "I think you are in for a big surprise!"

- Rosa Park had her fears. She worried that someone would attack her. She understood that if she refused to go to the back of the bus, she would be arrested and thrown in jail. Rosa later wrote that once she made up her mind as to what she had to do, the fear went away. She was firmly committed and willing to suffer any consequences.
- Even if we are fearful in these times that we or a loved one may contract COVID-19, or even if we are fearful about the economic consequences of this pandemic, we can still act with courage and conviction. We can still choose to get up each day

and do what is ours to do by finding ways to serve where we are at, however we can. We may be able to sew cloth face masks for others, call a lonely friend, neighbor, or family member, donate to a charity that is struggling to meet higher needs at this time, pray for those who are particularly suffering now, etc. Finding ways to be of service can give us a respite from our worries. Acting with courage and conviction, even if we feel like we're "faking it," can keep our fears at bay.

- It is easy to see why so many are fearful of this virus. We are not sure how it got started, where it is going, or who will be struck next. Most of us are sheltering in place, but some people are ignoring public health directives to social distance. Sadly, some people who continued to gather for religious ceremonies contracted the virus and died.
- The virus is circulating, and faith does not make us immune. Data tells us that the elderly, the weak, and those with underlying health conditions are especially vulnerable. Jesus calls his followers to be especially attentive to such people—as do the public health officials. As people of faith, we should set a good example.
- In this frightening time, we are confronted with our vulnerability, and so we must remember that we are all in this together. We are invited to be intentional about “who we want to be” when there is bad news reported from every quarter. Do we want to sink into fear, despair, and helplessness,

or do we want to be Easter people who remember that our God always finds a way to bring new life out of death and light into darkness? We are invited to be like Jesus' friends and family who went through the horrific experience of his crucifixion, only to come out the other side more courageous, bold, generous, and trusting in God's care for everyone.

- We may feel that we are in a small boat in the midst of a raging storm as this virus brings tragedy to our world. Jesus' apostles knew what that was like. They were fearful. But we have a choice to focus on how high the wind and waves are or to focus on Jesus walking on the water. We can keep our eyes on the sea (the terrible news) or we can keep our eyes on Jesus. If even one person in our “boat” (be it our immediate household, our neighborhood, or our wider community) can remain calm and centered and focused on God's presence with us, it can help everyone else.
- **Be not afraid.** As Christians, we have our faith to keep us strong. We have made our decision to follow Christ wherever he leads, and divine grace gives access to whatever we need. That doesn't mean that living through this pandemic will be easy, but Jesus has promised us his peace. “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (Jn. 14:27).

Reflection Questions

① When you are gripped with worry, anxiety, or fear, what helps you to move outside of yourself?

② What are some concrete things you can do to be of service to others during this time?

③ How do you see light and new life breaking into the world in spite of the bad news?

Closing Prayer

God of peace,

You have been with us every moment of our lives,
even when we could not feel you.

Help us to know your presence with us now during
this challenging time.

When we are worried or fearful, help us to still act
with courage, conviction, and hope.

May we experience the peace that surpasses all
understanding, even in this tumultuous time,
knowing that you are always with us.

We pray this all in Christ's name.

Amen.

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