

March 23, 2020

My dear people,

Some days have passed since I last wrote to you. Despite the shutdown of all church services and activities, I find myself surprisingly busy albeit quiet. While these bulletin style columns are nothing like real presence, they are, at least, some form of contact. As soon as I wrote that, I thought of the Real Presence of Christ in Holy Communion, a deprivation from which most are suffering these days. While the Lord is present to us in His Word, the Scriptures, the presence is not in substance as in the Holy Eucharist. Both are to be cherished.

The week to come, we are told, will be difficult as the COVID-19 virus is found in more and more people both as testing becomes more common and as this highly infectious demon spreads. We are not all going to have the same experience of this shutdown. I can only share my own. Perhaps you can relate. As mentioned earlier, I am still in the mountains of North Carolina, planning to return home this week. People keep telling me not to return as there is very little I can do at home and there is a certain wisdom in having your two priests physically separated lest one of gets infected and might infect the other. Regardless of the advice, I do plan to be home by Sunday in order to celebrate a **Sunday Mass at 9:30 A.M. on March 29 which will be livestreamed and afterward available on YouTube.** For directions on how to tune in, consult our website.

As we hunker down, I hope there is some time for reflection (at least in homes without children!). In the quiet here, I recently recalled a saying popular in my seminary years and early priesthood. It was about “being comfortable alone with yourself,” a healthy goal spiritually and psychologically. Well, I don’t have children and there’s no one else at the cabin, but I must admit I am not getting along with myself too well! All this quiet time and lack of activity is forcing me to reflect on myself (sort of like the increased interaction of siblings and children and parents) and I must say I don’t seem to respond to this crisis the way I might have thought I would. Usually when we have a shutdown at church, it is related to weather (hurricanes or snow with freezing weather). In both situations, we know what to expect and how to prepare. The preparations, especially for storms, keep us extremely busy for days. And the duration is not that long. This crisis is so different.

The whole country, indeed, the whole world, is struggling. I recalled a seminary lesson regarding two ubiquitous reactions today: fear and anxiety. In Catholic-speak, fear and anxiety are not the same. Fear is focused. Typically, people are able to name what causes their fear, at least in general terms. Anxiety, however, is more general in that it is concern about the unknown. In this pandemic both are appropriate, perhaps inevitable. Today, for myself, I think anxiety is the more difficult, but that could change. What about next week? Will the shutdown of churches end April 1? Reporters keep asking the President and others when we can stop hunkering down and keep being told we have to wait and see. This is the stuff of anxiety, the unknown future.

For my part, I continue to pray for you every day and offer the Sacrifice of the Mass at my little plywood altar, covered by a sheet and sitting on saw horses.

Yesterday, I got a break from the solitude as I had gotten word that Paul and Paula Heinauer were nearby in their house at Lake Lure. I invited myself to celebrate Sunday Mass there and drafted Paul as my lector. The three of us were very good at practicing social distancing during the Mass. Paul gave me permission to share this information and suggested I be sure to let you all know of our prayers for all of you, your families, all health care workers, all the sick and all others fighting the pandemic.

A few necessary shopping trips have taken me into town, but rarely. In addition to the grocery store (and, yes, well, the liquor store), I did go to two of my most confusing shopping venues ever: the Verizon store and Best Buy. Despite having minored in English in college, frankly I don't seem to speak the same language as the people working in those stores. I did find the public trying to be extra courteous and friendly even while practicing social distancing. However, I also overheard some tense conversations. This is to be expected in trying times. The veneer of civilization is rather thin and to realize this takes one back to the anxiety about the future. There is an antidote, however, in the virtue of Hope. Hope is not only for the situation in general, but for ourselves, that regardless of future conditions, we will be given the knowledge of what to do and the strength to do it, even if only one day at a time.

Related to the topic of anxiety is concern about the economy in general and specifically our parish finances. So far, I have deliberately avoided talking about money in these troubled times. Money is not our primary concern so I have been waiting to address the topic. Rather than intermingling material concerns with these reflections, I have decided to write about our finances separately. Having done some research, I will soon share some thoughts and suggestions. As we continue, we pray, and remember our state motto: *Dum spiro, spero* (While I breathe, I hope).

Saint Roch, pray for us, that we may be preserved from all diseases of body and soul.

Father McInerney