

April 1, 2020

My dear people,

Greetings on the day the Corona virus shutdown was scheduled to end. The projections about deaths are sobering. In the big picture, our discomfort over social distancing and the shutdown, though very real, is merely discomfort and not death (pray God). Among our blessings, we count the communications technology, the advances in medicine, and other forms of knowledge about the virus and the pandemic. Likewise, we have food, shelter and protection in our homes. And we have people, good people, in the works of public service and safety, those who are staffing our grocery stores and filling stations, the people who transport goods, the workers in the grocery stores. The list could go on and on. We receive so much news about the pandemic that I will not try to repeat it here. Instead, let me offer you two areas of thought:

SPECIFICS:

Many of you have thanked me for the livestreamed Mass last Sunday at 9:30. We know there were technical difficulties which are being addressed and hopefully will have been rectified by this Sunday (Palm Sunday). We have been directed not to bless palms this year due to the pandemic. It is our hope to livestream the services of Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil. Our plan is to livestream a Latin High Mass at 9:30 A.M. on Easter Sunday. Those who prefer the Novus Ordo Mass can go to YouTube and watch the Mass from the Easter Vigil. Personally, I found the livestreamed Mass emotionally surprising. Upon processing in and entering the sanctuary, I felt the sadness of an empty church. At times, it was disorienting not to hear the prayers and responses of the congregation. Even not hearing the usual shuffling as people sit, kneel or stand was disconcerting.

We have heard the pandemic referred to as a war. There are certainly similarities. As I find certain items rationed in the grocery stores, I think of stories from WWII. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Red Cross made contact with Ann Thompson about having a **Blood Drive** due to a critical shortage. On Tuesday I met with the Town Administrator, Andy Benke, and the Fire Chief, Anthony Stith. The challenge of getting donors out to the Island was but one difficulty. Mr. Benke proposed we use Christ Our King-Stella Maris School, which makes a lot of sense given its large parking area which is currently not in use. I drove over to talk with Fr. Spencer and he agreed as did Mr. John Byrnes, President of the school. Please check our website for details as to when this might happen.

Despite our lack of Sunday collections, I took a leap of faith and contracted to have the new marble in the church aisles re-sealed. I was told to do this some six months after the marble was installed, but when do we ever get a few days when the church is not in use? It seemed like no-brainer. Since this past Monday, the church has been closed to visitors as the marble was cleaned and sealed. The Blessed Sacrament has been reserved in the Hall where people have made visits. By noon

tomorrow (April 2), the Blessed Sacrament should be back in the church which will be open for visitors from around 9:00 A.M through 7:00 P.M. We continue our earnest prayers for the dying, the sick, the vulnerable, for all healthcare workers, for first responders and all those working in stores that are open as well as those who get the supplies to the stores. Go truck drivers!

In my previous letter, I addressed our financial situation. A number of you have responded with mindfulness of our needs to operate despite a lack of Sunday collections. Thank you. I have basically stopped purchases other than necessities and put everything on hold. As I told our staff, forget about what might be left in your budgets. The budget is shot! My priority now is to: address the needs of those who are struggling (contributions should go directly to our St. Vincent de Paul Society) and to support our staff without furloughs or layoffs. Key to the outcome is the timing of the shutdown. The timing is the unknown factor that causes so much anxiety. At times like this, I go back to my mother's response when (as an adult) I asked her how she ever did it with seven of us and not a large income even with both parents working. "One day at a time," she said, "and some days one hour at a time." For today, I trust we all have roofs over our heads, clothes on our backs, some food in the pantry and hopefully some bathroom tissue!

IN GENERAL:

As we all know, we are looking at another two weeks of confinement and the continued danger associated with the pandemic. As your pastor, I write about my specific "niche", the spiritual. Years ago, my spiritual director, proposed that I take a good look at myself on my day off. Removed from public expectations and a defined "role", he suggested that I could see my real self by reflecting on what I might do on a day off. This shutdown is something like many days off. At least that's what I thought in the beginning. Personally, I wondered if this is what retirement would be like. Well, actually, talking with other priests and laity, I find that many are very busy these days. Over and over, I hear fellow priests say it would be easier to operate the parish with the office open. Mainly, it's the internet that consumes so much time, but so much can get done online and it needs to get done.

Many have shared a common experience I wrote about earlier: the need for a schedule. For me, the morning schedule is very important. It gets the day off to a good start. Some months ago, in a homily, I quoted the Admiral who gave a commencement address in which he told the graduates to make up their beds in the morning as an early reminder that there are tasks to perform in the day to come. Within the schedule, there should be time for prayer, spiritual reading, and simply reflecting on our situation with the eyes of faith. We might examine the pandemic and the response to it in light of the theological virtues: faith, hope and love. This crisis provides an opportunity and a challenge to practice these virtues, perhaps even to an heroic degree.

Families in confinement together report positive outcomes as people talk more and interact more with each other. One parent lauded the cancellation of all sporting events and extracurricular activities, a respite from constant transportation to practices and games. If there are tense moments in confinement, just know it's

natural. As I mentioned earlier, I am living alone and am not always getting along with myself very well.

On a more spiritual level, I heard from one person who was reflecting on the “hole in the soul” we all share. As a believer, I see that hole as God-given. When God made the human person, He left that spot that only He can fill. As is often said: trying to fill the hole in the soul with anything other than God is like trying to drive a square peg into a round hole. This crisis has removed many of our square pegs and other distractions and we can look at that gaping hole and honestly ask God to fill it.

We cannot see the end of this path yet. How and when it will end is unknown to us. We suspect we will be different, hopefully for the better. You youngsters may well be telling stories someday to your children and grandchildren, stories like the ones I used to hear about the 1918 flu epidemic. We have faith in God’s help and we look for God in whatever goodness, truth and beauty we see in these crazy times. Because we have faith, we have that virtue by which we confidently expect that God will be true to His promises, the virtue of hope. And in all moments (tense and relaxed) and with all people (both those helping us and annoying us) we strive to practice charity. No one should be bored with all these challenges.

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

Father McNerny