

My dear people,

On Monday of the past week, my quarantine for COVID 19 ended. On Tuesday, I put in a few hours work in the office and on Wednesday, I felt sufficiently recovered to celebrate Mass. In the office, I found your many get well cards and notes. Likewise, I have mentioned receiving your many responses to FlockNote as well as emails. Thank you. Thank you, in particular, for remembering me in your prayers. Compliant to my advisors, I am pacing myself in my return to duties and doing all I know to do to avoid any recurrence or flare up of COVID symptoms. When I first informed you of my diagnosis, I mentioned that I was really too ill to write much and implied I would write more about the experience later. A couple of people have asked when I am going to write up my experience. To one, I replied, 'Who would want to read some old man's accounts of his aches and pains?' For the present, my battle with COVID 19 is too fresh write about. Call it PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder), but I am not ready to go there yet. Maybe later.

While I know it is important to pace oneself in recovery, I also know how great it is to feel like enjoying life. With careful planning for rest before and after the event, I did get myself into the creek Wednesday night to utilize July's new moon in the search for flounder. I did see a fair number, but the new minimum length of 15" forced me to pass on most. I was pleased enough, however, to come home with three as I have certainly done worse. To my surprise, I did not see as many blue crabs in the creek as I had earlier in the season. Let's hope that the creek's most delectable offering, the Carolina blue crab, is plentiful even if not visible to those gigging for flounder.

As I return to my pastoral duties and as the pandemic continues (especially in the southeast), I am eliciting thoughts on what we can do to hold our community together. While our spiritual bonds are strong, I am sure most people are missing the social ties and other various forms of connection. In the days to come, I look forward to working with parish staff to develop a program, a plan of action, experiments in connection that are safe in a pandemic.

Last week, in my personal battle with COVID, I raised some questions about the spirituality of it all. "Where is God?" I asked. With the relief of suffering and return of health this week, I came to some partial answer. In short, I realized that the sense of doom, pain and desolation were but a taste of life without God. Ultimately, without God, we die. As St. Francis deSales urged: consider you age, add one year to that; at that point you did not exist. God called you into existence and holds you there.' To which I add "If you ever doubt God's love for you, look at your hand. Does it still exist? Then, God continues to hold you in the existence to which He called you and He continues to love you." In sickness, we can get a taste of what life would be like without

God. Two weeks of COVID is no picnic, but there are people who endure physical and mental suffering for years. Thank you, God, for health.

In the course of the week, I received an inquiry about our policy regarding wearing masks at Stella Maris. Our policy is that masks are highly encouraged but not required. If not for oneself, I encourage people to wear masks for the sake of others. Here is my rationale:

1. From the time of my graduate studies in Canon Law, I have tried to abide by the *Regulae iuris*, i.e. “rules of law”, one in particular: *Ubi lex non distinguit, nec nos distinguere debemus* (Where the law does not distinguish, neither should we.) Whether planning a wedding or funeral liturgy or implementing pandemic guidelines, this has been my rationale: abide by the law/guidelines and do not impose personal preferences or taste. Our parish policy regarding the pandemic, is, to my best understanding, in accord with Diocesan guidelines and civil law, to wit:

2. Despite what anyone may have been told in another parish, the Bishop of Charleston has **not** mandated the use of masks except for the people who are distributing Holy Communion.

3. As regards civil law, my understanding is that Governor McMaster has clearly stated that religious bodies are not required to mandate masks during services.

4. I have received numerous citations both for and against requiring masks. Some people feel very strongly that the mask requirement is about politics and control. About a month or so ago, I read a notice (probably dated) in my doctor’s office that the World Health Organization (WHO) did not encourage the wearing of masks! Other people argue that the masks are a true deterrent to the spread of the virus and cite numerous sources. Personally, I defer to the latter for the sake of following the safer path and very much encourage the use of masks.

5. Enforcement: Years ago, I learned a valuable lesson as a high school teacher, one which I hope all parents appreciate: do not make rules you cannot enforce. As I have asked before: who is going to enforce a mandate for masks? Shall I stop Mass to issue citations or deputize the ushers to arrest people?

6. These are difficult and stressful times. Each parish, community and individual should be making informed decisions for their own good and for the good of others. I have been through COVID 19 and (thankfully) survived it. I wish it on no one and urge compliance with all valid suggestions to halt its spread. As for dictating who may or may not attend Mass, e.g. excluding older people, or what people must wear (beyond the requirements of Church or civil

law) is not in my provenance: “Where the law does not distinguish, neither should we.”

7. Options: As I have stated before, I have received numerous suggestions as to what we should or might do during the pandemic. In response, I remind everyone: no public space can be 100% safe. If you do not feel safe in church, do not attend. The obligation to attend Mass does not oblige during the pandemic. If you want to be able to receive Holy Communion, hear Mass outside the church on the loudspeaker or sit nearby in your car and tune to FM 97.1, or socially distance in the Hall where you can see/hear Mass on closed circuit television, then come to the church to receive Holy Communion.

These are trying times. I do not believe God imposes sickness, suffering and death but as Christians we worship a God who took suffering and death upon Himself and radically transformed it into a means to glory. May I suggest, in the midst of these times, a simple spiritual exercise: Call to mind three blessings (spiritual, material, social, familial, or emotional) and as you call each to mind simply say, “Thank you, Lord.” Peace.

Father McInerny