April 26, 2020: Third Sunday of Easter

I was asked by one of our parishioners who teaches religion at Lowell Catholic if she could interview me via ZOOM. She wanted to ask me questions from her freshman classes about the Church and specifically about the priesthood and my own journey. I said, “Sure!” It took a couple of weeks before we could do it, but last Tuesday we had that meeting. It was interesting to hear the questions the kids had for me. But one question ended up really intriguing me, more about my response than the question itself. The question was, “What do you miss the most right now?” If you had asked me a month ago—before this all started—what my answer would be, it would most likely have been very different than what I said. Most likely I would have said something about the sacraments. Instead, my answer was quick and easy: I did not even have to think about my response. “I miss being with my parishioners.” The reality is that I am a rather big introvert and, honestly, being alone does not bother me at all. I enjoy being by myself, and solitude generally is something I personally look forward to. The best retreat for me is being with only one other person and having a lot of time alone with God.

But, I was also ordained to be a diocesan priest which generally means working with people in a parish. And I have come to realize that this is one of the things I truly cherish. Especially during this time, it has become abundantly clear to me how important the people of God are in my life. When I look out at the empty church, there really is an ache in my heart. I feel a true need to have people physically present, and without them there exists a real emptiness. For me, as an introvert, it is not about being alone; that does not bother me. Rather, as a human being it is about making connections with a community. And, as a person of faith, it is about making connections with people who gather for the same purpose, the same intention, the same desire to worship the one true God. Led by Christ! Empowered by the Holy Spirit! I know people are watching and participating. I know people are being nourished by what we are doing. However, it is not the same as their being with you in the same place, at the same time with a common goal and vision.

As human beings we are made in the image and likeness of God. And God, as Trinity, by His very nature is community. Therefore, we also, by our nature, are intended to be united in community. It is at the heart of what it means to be truly human. And though our technology is helping us to bridge some of the gaps during this unprecedented moment in our history, it does not have the capacity to create personal bonds that can only exist when people are together in same space.

But this moment is also creating an opportunity for us to begin to recognize what is truly important to us. As I said above, I believe the answers I would have given a month ago, about what is important to me, would most likely have been different. Trust that the people of God have always been important to me, but when they are no longer directly present, the longing it creates helps me to reevaluate what matters most to me.

I am also, at the core of my being, an optimist. And I see every challenge generally as an opportunity. It is simply a question of how one wants to approach any given situation. I am learning a lot about myself, my staff, and my parishes during this time. And it also is making me wonder how we can do things differently or better. I have no answers yet but the challenge before me is to start trying to figure out the right questions to ask. I know I will not be doing this alone. But it is important to begin a process of self-discovery whenever we are confronted with moments that upend our lives. It is important to ask the questions we might think we already know the answers to, and discover whether or not we are correct in our assessment.

We do not know when we will be back together again as a family, joining in our worship in the same place, at the same time. It is a day that I personally am very much anticipating and desiring to be sooner rather than later. However—whenever that day may be—the time we have beforehand does not have to be a time that is wasted. It can be a time in which we all can learn more about ourselves and our community of faith.
We are living out Lent and Easter in a very different way this year. But God is with us and He is calling us not to focus again on what is not there, but rather, that we are still together as a community joined in prayer, faith, hope and love. In this time let us simply remember what Paul wrote to the Ephesians, and know that it is still true for us this day: “I, then, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to live in a manner worthy of the call you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another through love, striving to preserve the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace: one body and one Spirit, as you were also called to the one hope of your call; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in all.”

If you have any questions about anything, please do not hesitate to ask me directly, or send your questions to me at fr.brian@chelmsfordcatholic.org.

Please keep me in your prayers.

In Christ,

Fr. Brian