

May 20, 2020: Singing while masked

Yesterday evening I prayed evening prayer at St. Joe's right before their 5:15 Mass. That has been the practice of the friary for some time but had been suspended when only private Masses were allowed. During that time we just prayed evening prayer in the friary.

Upon arrival I was presented with hand sanitizer and was handed a mask. Then, evening prayer started with the opening hymn. That was the first time I had been confronted with the task of singing while wearing a mask. It didn't feel that comfortable. It did get me thinking, though, about the place of singing in our liturgies once they begin again. I think we will want to keep the singing simple. We will be encouraging people to wear masks during the liturgy, for one thing. Doing so corresponds with the basic Christian commandment to love one's neighbor. Since masks do a good job of containing coughs and sneezes and just the general projection of fluids from our mouths, wearing a mask is a simple action that aids in protecting those around us if we should happen to be sick and or, in the present circumstances, if we have the corona virus and just don't know it yet.

Singing, since it is a more energetic practice than mere speaking, would probably involve farther projection of fluids, and so, should be reduced for the time being. I will be working with Kurt on how to do that without compromising the liturgical experience too much. It may be that he and the cantor will have to pick up a larger part of the task.

A related question is, why do we have to wear masks at church when we don't have to at, say, Wal-Mart? As I understand it, there are two components involved in the question—space and time. We all know that the social distancing space is 6 feet, right? The time element is important, too, though. At Wal-Mart the time any one person is in our presence is small, some seconds probably. At church, the issue is that we will be together for a longer period of time, let's say 45 minutes, which makes transmission of the virus more possible if we or our neighbor should happen to be infected with it. We don't want people getting sick by going to church. So, to keep that from happening, which could then lead to dire circumstances for them and closing back down again for all of us, wearing a mask seems to be the order of the day. Singing everything we normally have sung? Not so much.