

## **HUNKERED BUT NOT CONQUERED**

### *A Pastoral Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic with Hope, Faith, and Creativity*

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From the perspective of a local parish priest, the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted a lot of pastoral and liturgical responses and changes. During this time, the default setting of parishes and parishioners has been completely altered. There seems to be a sense of confusion as to what lies ahead, both for the duration of this pandemic and even post pandemic.

It all began on March 17, 2020, when the Government of Ontario declared a state of emergency throughout the province in response to the pandemic. Strict rules were put in place, and I knew that my ministry in the parish would have to change. But what I did not know was how this change and the new realities would play out. Immediately, I began to reflect on the pastoral implications of the mandated closure of our parish church, the suspension of public Masses, the suppression of celebration of the sacraments, the closure of the parish office, and the halting of parish pastoral activities, including visitation to the sick and shut-ins. I knew that I must respond with faith in the midst of uncertainty, with hope in the midst of fear and anxiety, and with creativity in the midst of isolation. Given that the whole experience of the pandemic was uncharted territory, I also knew how important it would be to reach out to the people of the parish and beyond for assistance in navigating the whole situation.

As a priest who lives his life in and around the Church, this has been a time of great anxiety, and I am sure that this is also true for my brother priests. I have found myself in the difficult position of assuaging my own fears and apprehensions while doing my best to attend to the fears and needs of our parishioners. Added to this anxiety has been concern about the wellbeing of my family in faraway Nigeria. The pandemic turned me into a worrier – about my parishioners, about my family overseas, and about myself. I can only say thanks be to God that all of us are doing well and staying healthy. In a sense, my personal fears, combined with ministerial experience, informed my pastoral responses to the pandemic. These responses have been guided by three principles: hope, faith, and creativity.

The first of these responses was to offer hope to my parishioners. This pandemic has made everyone fearful and anxious. Never have people been so afraid of coming close to one another – let alone hugging and shaking hands – even with their own family members. Never have people been so afraid of stepping out of their homes, even to buy food, medicine, or gasoline. Never have people been so anxious about their own mortality in a fight against an invisible enemy. Never have people been so afraid of going to church, even on Easter Sunday. Indeed, the pandemic has reaped a harvest of fear. My own experience with, and empathy for, these fears prompted me to post a series of weekly messages of hope to our parishioners via all our online channels (e-mail, Facebook, and our parish website). All the messages had the same theme – “Hunkered but not Conquered”. Writing these messages was something I looked forward to doing, and something our parishioners told me they looked forward to receiving. I am grateful that technology enabled me to maintain communication and a pastoral presence with our parishioners during an unusual and perilous time.

The second pastoral response to the pandemic was to ensure that parishioners remained rooted in the faith, despite the uncertainties around us. The pandemic has shaken us to the core. From the government’s action of deeming church “a non-essential service” to the many personal questions about the place of God in the pandemic, people grappled with their faith and struggled to find answers to their faith questions. Unfortunately, the closure of churches meant that many were left to find the answers on their own without the direct support of their pastor and fellow parishioners. This made me realize the importance of emphasizing the place and strength of the home as the domestic church. Hence, my catechesis was developed to address the need to find God before the storm, during the storm, and after the storm, even from the comfort of our individual homes. This can happen through prayer, scripture readings, private and family faith study, and outreach to the needy. In our parish, we organized an outreach program to telephone practically all of our parishioners, helping them to rediscover the importance and beauty of family prayer and worship. Where two or three are gathered in the name of Christ, there He is in our midst. Home is where we can build up our faith when circumstances separate us from the parish church.

Finally, the third way that I responded to the pandemic was to be pastorally creative. The pandemic challenged priests in different ways. For some, the challenge was living in isolation; for others, it was upping their game and brushing up on their technological skills, since activities and outreach would have to take place online; for others, it was simply finding ways to fill up their hours and days while they were hunkered down. Each challenge called for some measure of creativity on the part of the priest. In my own case, I can say that necessity has improved my technological skills. One sure evidence of this is the weekly celebration of livestreamed Masses and liturgies. I am very grateful for our “techier” parishioners who have come to my rescue. So, whether it is acquiring technological skills or learning how to use the fogging machine after Masses, the pandemic has created opportunities for creativity and growth in more ways than one. This is certainly something I will bring into my post-COVID-19 pastoral ministry.

COVID-19, as bad as it is, has led us, as a people and as a Church, into new ways of thinking and acting. As clergy and as lay faithful, it is left for us to find and embrace these new ways of relating to God and to one another. I believe that the pandemic has revealed our deepest longing for God, for one another, and for our communities. How we respond now will determine the type of Christians and the type of Church we will be when we fully emerge from our isolation and liturgical semi-lockdown. My hope is that we will emerge as a more faithful Church of which we will be more creative members, and that all of us will be more hopeful Christians. Yes, we may be hunkered down, but we are not conquered in faith, hope, and creativity.