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There are plenty out there with spiritual advice in this dangerous time. You have probably heard of, or read Fr. James Martin's excellent piece from AMERICA magazine: <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2020/03/13/faith-time-coronavirus> What is the solution? It's almost trite to say, fear not.

I think that we are being called to a deeper level of spiritual depth, one where we truly let nothing disturb us as we take as many precautions as possible. Let's start by naming our areas of fear and recognize what it is that it is most disturbing us.

We may be banned from gatherings over a certain number, but nothing is preventing us from reaching out to others in ways that we know are safe.

Let's maintain a sense of humour. Indeed, there are many humorous stories at this time. Let's show our fear that we have control over it. I can't control the virus or the weather, but I can determine what my reaction will be. Even if you can't be calm, be strong and carry on.

Whenever I go to a movie I enjoy identifying with the main character. I see myself as an avatar battling for my life against winged dragons and fantastic beasts. I can feel the pain as the main character is rejected and experiences failure. I sense the isolation of a protagonist struggling against himself and his own demons. I also feel the pleasure of triumph when the hero overcomes his enemies.

All these feelings seemed to rush through me as I watched the film Joker. In it, Joaquin Phoenix plays Arthur Fleck (the Joker) a comedian trying to launch his comedic career and make people laugh. Unfortunately for him, mental illness, and the reality of his own history begins to surface leaving him further and further depressed and isolated. By the end of the film he becomes a man with "nothing to lose."

We can all sympathize with such a character. We all struggle with our disabilities in a society that expects normality from us. We all long to make something of ourselves only to see the outside and the inside world get in our way. We all carry the seeds of laughter but also hate.

This is perhaps what is the most disturbing aspect about the film. We sympathize with a character who at the end of the film becomes something downright diabolical. The director manages to draw in the audience and take them on a steady and smooth path to hell.

It was CS Lewis who said "The safest road to Hell is the gradual one – the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts."

Joker is exactly that. We don't really know or are unsure of where things go precisely wrong. There are no signposts. Joker feels himself to be justified and has public approval on his side. Yet he is wrong. The audience is wrong. And the path he is on leads to much suffering.

So it is with us as well, no? There are no signposts for our own lives. Minor steps, minor concessions add up – then finally we wonder how we ever got here? Perhaps we too can pause our own film. We too can take a breather and reflect on how we got here and where in the end we want to be.

Flattening the curve. Self-isolation. Social distancing. Tele-commuting. Herd immunity. We are hearing a few new terms at this time. We are living with an unprecedented situation, one that has serious repercussions for almost every area of our lives – whether personal, familial, ecclesial, Eucharistic, communal, academic, work, financial, physical and mental and spiritual health, sports and entertainment and shopping, and just about everything in our life.

Other than hiding in bed, name just one area that is not being influenced.

I've never thought of myself as an unusually fearful person. I have a fear of things such as spiders, snakes and heights. I only experience a normal level of anxiety. I've written on this blog so often with quotes from Jesus about not being afraid. I have often spoken about fearlessness in homilies.

I've given spiritual direction and classes to countless people where I remind people of that call to let go of anxiety and fear. But this – COVID 19 – has unleashed something different in me, and, I suspect, most others. Why? I suppose that the rational part of me can tell myself that I am just a victim of the mass hysteria that is sweeping the globe.

There is certainly something to be said for that. Is our constant supply of news and updates and advisories and cancellations making things worse? Probably, but there is still an inner fear.

I've become almost obsessed about things like door handles, taps, keyboards, and the like. Is it irrational? Is it because I'm over 60, and, therefore, among those that are more at risk than the younger? Is it because a religious community is more difficult to keep clean and consistent than a family home?

I am anxious and afraid. I am offering sessions on the Spiritual Exercises each Monday this month. A week ago I had to get to the venue by GO (commuter) Train and the TTC (local transportation in Toronto). I was terrified once I realized that I had touched many surfaces. I sat in my seat on the subway and kept my hands in my lap.

I didn't touch my face. Nor did I reach for my phone. I got off at my station and headed immediately for a drugstore and purchased hand sanitizer. I eventually got home safe and sound, had a shower, and threw my clothing in the washing machine. (I'm grateful that the remaining sessions will be offered by video chat on social media.)

I know that I am not alone. And, to be honest, I am probably more fortunate than others.

I live in a situation where it is relatively easy to self-isolate, with the exception that a religious community can't easily control who is around and, even, who last touched that handle or counter top. I've taken to touching doorknobs and handles with a paper towel and washing my hands over and over.