

**Pastor's Notes: Help us stay open; keep your mask on**

December 20, 2020

The coronavirus has been a reality that has affected us here at the Basilica since the spring. We have learned so much over the past nine months, but there is still a lot of uncertainty surrounding this disease. Whereas before there was a lot of fear stemming from the unknown, now we have lots more data from people who have experienced it firsthand. The reality is, this disease is not like the plagues of old that decimated society with heavy death tolls per capita. However, it is also not a disease to be sneezed at, pardon the pun. There are people that are dying from this disease, and not all of them are in the vulnerable category — though to be fair, that is the source of the majority of fatalities. While many people experience no symptoms or only mild symptoms, a fair amount of people have experienced more substantial symptoms. Some have even had lasting and lingering effects of the disease. To say the least, it's not something that can simply be brushed off as "nothing."

In order to address the rapid spreading of this disease with its potential for harm, civil authorities have called for various measures in society to combat it. While I think it obvious that many people have tried to politicize the disease one way or the other, we must be careful not to simply dismiss it or over-emphasize it, based on these political spins. There are certain reasonable and good measures that have been proposed. While inconvenient, they are at least legitimate attempts to curb the spread of a disease that has the potential to harm the most vulnerable among us. We have a duty as citizens in our land to respect the authorities placed over us and to do our part to participate in the health and well-being of society. This is a basic tenet of civil life. But we as Catholic Christians know that we have a higher authority than even the state that we are beholden to; namely, God, and those God has established as having authority in His Church. This authority is manifest for us as Catholic Christians through apostolic succession in our bishops. We may agree or disagree with the measures they have put in place, and —keeping in mind no one can coerce one's conscience to act against its dictates— we have a duty to obey the reasonable and presumably temporary measures that they have instructed us to do in matters pertaining to the common good. As members of the Body of Christ, which we profess to be through our Baptism, we do not have the liberty to be "libertines." Again, pardon the pun. In fact, this is the error of our separated brothers and sisters, the Protestants, who took it upon themselves to rebel from legitimate authority at a time when much worse abuses of power or scandalous behavior was their excuse.

Whether or not you agree on the severity of the coronavirus, the leaders of the Church must take a prudent course of action that protects the most vulnerable among us. Even if hindsight might prove something different, it behooves us to err on the side of prudence at the present moment. Bishop Stika has issued a series of decrees for the Diocese of Knoxville in an effort to keep the doors of our churches open and our public Masses available. In order to do so, he has instructed us to take certain precautionary measures that are not immoral, nor unreasonably burdensome, considering this crisis our world is facing. There are individuals who, for various reasons—medical, psychological, or other reasons—are not able to wear a mask. For this reason, the bishop has very clearly and consistently exempted all from the obligation to attend Mass and has instructed those who cannot abide by these provisions to avoid coming to church while this disease remains a threat. We have gone to great lengths to provide online options so that we can continue to connect with those who remain home, at least in a virtual way. However, everyone who comes into the church exercises a certain amount of risk of exposure to the disease. This is a risk many are willing to make because of their deep faith and desire for the Sacraments and closeness with God. However, our devotion and desire to be close to God should not be in open defiance of the legitimate authority that God Himself has put over us. There are also many arguments, on the level of charity and kindness towards our neighbor, that would indicate obedience to these decrees is the best course of action. There have been many who have said that seeing people without masks on in church has caused them to stay away from the Sacraments and from coming to church. Even if there were only a minimal amount of help given by a mask and separating ourselves in mitigating the spread of this disease, it would seem that for the majority of people, who are otherwise healthy, the law of charity would bind us to bearing this burden for love of neighbor.

Another aspect to be considered is that if the reasonable precautions put in place in churches are not followed, the bishop may be forced to make further provisions, including shutting the doors of the church, God forbid! I preach often about the primacy of the spiritual and of caring for the soul more than we care for our bodies. But in this instance, if we do not take care of covering our bodies, we run the risk of being hindered from caring for our souls in open churches with sacraments freely distributed. Though we may individually disagree with the efficacy of wearing masks or socially distancing, or if we find these measures inconvenient, they are not worth provoking the authorities charged with the common good from taking more drastic measures. The Bishop's decree is clear that he expects everyone not only to come into church wearing a mask, but that they would keep the mask on during the whole of the Mass. Help us stay open during the pandemic! In order to do this, we need to obey the Bishop's mandate for social distancing and wearing a face covering. Please keep your mask on during Mass. We hope many more people will be coming through our doors in the next few weeks to celebrate Christmas and New Year. I invite you to bear this burden for the sake of all who will be drawn to God through our liturgies, and that our obedience might bear the fruit of conversion of souls.

