

Fr. Carter's April 9 Interview with Bill Brewer, Editor of the East Tennessee Catholic

April 19, 2020

I was just recently asked by Bill Brewer, Editor of the East Tennessee Catholic, about how our parish is responding in the coronavirus pandemic. I thought I would just share with you my answers in full here, knowing that most of them will not be used in the article.

How has your ministry been affected by the current situation?

Obviously, the normal face-to-face interactions with parishioners at Mass and on Sundays have dropped precipitously. The regularly scheduled groups, book studies, Bible studies, homeschool co-op, and other parish offerings have ceased to meet in person during this time. However, this has caused us to be creative and much more proactive in reaching out to our parishioners.

How are you able to connect with your parishioners?

We have been able to reach out by modern means of technology and stay in touch with our parishioners. Our Masses are streamed live on our Facebook page. Our parish council, youth group, young couples ministry, and even a group praying the Liturgy of the Hours, have met via online services like Zoom. I have also taken an initiative to go out to the families with Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, keeping in mind the requirements of social distancing. I have arranged it so that families can adore our Eucharistic Lord and receive a Eucharistic blessing from their front porch as I come to them by car. We have increased our email communication and the use of myParish app, just to continually stay in touch with our people.

How has your parish responded?

The parishioners have responded mostly in a positive way, recognizing the uniqueness of this situation. There are, of course, many who are sad because of the cancellation of public Masses and their inability to have access to the Sacraments. However, the vast majority are very understanding of the unique situation and are cooperating and participating in the creative ways that we are offering. We see many comments and "likes" on our Facebook posts and live-streams. We received quite a few pictures of people participating as a family during our Sunday Masses at home. And we have been able to even introduce people to things like the Liturgy of the Hours that we pray at the Basilica, which they had not had the opportunity to experience before. I have also heard of great initiatives among our parishioners, even in neighborhoods, where they are doing things like the Stations of the Cross amongst the households.

Can you remember anything similar to this in your lifetime? If so, please elaborate. If not, what do you conclude about this pandemic from personal and pastoral standpoints?

The only time I can remember the whole world coming to a standstill like this was 9/11. But otherwise, this stands out as a unique situation in the times that I have lived through. I think we will be debating the ethics of our reaction to pandemics like this in the future, asking very important questions about how to prudently respond. I think there will be lots of debate about the morality and ethics about health care, end of life care, how to best use limited resources, etc. There will also be lots of discussions about access to the Sacraments, the rights of the faithful, religious liberty issues, liturgical practices, etc., such as the shaking of hands at the sign of peace and the distribution of the Precious Blood. Hindsight is always 20-20, but for the time being we are doing the best we can, considering the circumstances.

What are your major concerns about the current situation as they relate to your parish?

My fear is that people will feel more and more distant from the parish, the church in general and that they will lose sight of the beauty of our sacramental faith if they go too long without it. We must do everything we can to "thread the needle" of providing people with the Bread of Life to feed their souls while not threatening their physical life and damaging their bodies with the virus. The goal in all our measures is not the denial of the sacraments to the people. It is the reduction of the spread of the virus. If we can enact measures that accomplish that goal of reducing the spreading of the virus while still providing people the sacraments their souls need, we should.

Are there any unintended consequences, positive or negative?

I have had far more individual interactions with people than I had before the crisis, even if only over means of technology. I just came off a three-month sabbatical at a monastery, which I very much enjoyed, and which gave me great foundation in the spiritual life. But I came back to a situation that had us quarantined and basically living a semi-monastic life with an emphasis on prayer and the daily work to reach out to people. Believe it or not, this has been a good transition back from sabbatical, even though it is a unique and demanding situation. The priests are praying together and eating together much more than we did before this pandemic. I think the same phenomenon applies for families. For good or for ill, families are forced to be family. Neighbors are getting to know each other. And I can foresee a great societal benefit from this reawakening of a sense of belonging to a community.

