

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius
May 3, 2020
Spiritual Ponderings
Corona Virus & the Sacraments

I had already completed my Spiritual Ponderings for the month of May, when a friend of mine, recommended that I read this article that he forward to me on Facebook. It was called: "Epidemic Danger and Catholic Sacraments" and was written by a theologian named Thomas Joseph White. I felt God asking me to use this article as a stepping off point for my own reflections on what this strange time of "social distancing" means for the Church. Quotes from his article will be in bold and my commentary and reflections will be in normal font. *Thomas Joseph White, O.P., is director of the Thomistic Institute in Rome.*

As the Church enters a Triduum where a great majority of the faithful lack public access to the sacraments, I'd like to offer some reflections that stand in sharp contrast to those currently being promoted by the editor of *First Things*, my friend Rusty Reno, regarding the current pandemic, civic responsibility, and access to the sacraments. In fact, I take his views to be rather misguided, though well-intentioned, and am grateful for his magnanimity in inviting me to offer an alternative position.

I found the way that Thomas White began his article awesome in the sense that he begins in a way that shows that he is interested in creating a dialogue and not conflict. I also give Rusty Reno credit for allowing Thomas White to offer an opinion that differs from him in a magazine where he is one of the chief editors. This is how things are supposed to work in the Church. These are two people, who demonstrate that they are trying to offer their thoughts on an issue without beating each other up. There have been many great debates in history of the Church and the only time a person becomes a heretic is when the Church finally declares that an idea is wrong and someone continues to stubbornly hold onto it.

I realize the issues are fraught, and anyone's view is necessarily subject to a fair amount of fallible prudential judgment. I hope, however, to at least ground my arguments in both Catholic principles and a realistic assessment of our current situation, so as to develop what I think are measured and appropriate positions.

The preceding quote from Thomas White demonstrates another important part of how to argue in an appropriate way. It shows that he has put a lot of thought into what he is about to say. This does not mean that he is right or wrong but it does show that he is not speaking to hear himself speak or to fill in the silence.

My first claim is based on a basic given of natural law. The state has a fundamental obligation to protect human life, especially when it is gravely threatened. This obligation is compounded in a time of epidemic if there is a danger of a generalized collapse of the medical system through a rapid and overwhelming influx of new cases of a deadly disease, which COVID-19 certainly is. In a context where the medical system breaks down, deaths from the disease multiply and many other maladies cannot be safely treated. The state, then, has a moral obligation to seek to halt or slow the spread of the disease. In requesting a thoroughgoing but temporary quarantine, governments across the world are following both traditional, time-tested procedure and proven scientific advice. In doing so they are acting in accord with human inclinations to protect life that are both basic and intrinsically good, even ineradicably so, despite the effects of sin on political organizations. Civic governments are wounded by sin, but not radically depraved. They can still pursue and uphold basic natural goods, as they are seeking to do in this case.

We, Catholics, believe in Divine and Natural Law. Divine Law meaning the Law of God which is manifested in Natural Law – the laws instilled by God into nature when He created the world. According to the principals of Natural Law the state (Civil Government) is supposed to align its laws with Natural Law. This is why we Catholics get so worked up over the fact that abortion is legal.

There is something different between quarantine people in order to save lives and quarantine people because of who they are. Our civil leaders knew that they our medical systems (hospitals, testing, etc.) would be overwhelmed if they did not do something to stop the halt of this disease. They are therefore trying to protect/save lives by asking us to social distance.

Furthermore, because temporary (two to three months) quarantine measures are the essential key to stemming transmission rates so that societies can learn to deal with this illness more competently, quarantine is also a necessary first step in the restoration of public economic well-being and civic freedoms. Opposing the two (health vs. civic flourishing) is scientifically unrealistic and ethically irresponsible.

Human beings have a tendency to make it “this thing” verses “this thing” issue. As Jesus said the Devil likes to divide. Human society cannot flourish while so many of its people are dying. At the same time, we must admit that we are in uncharted area for most of us because financial hardships can put people lives at risks also. We must remember that addressing this issue as “us” verses “them” mentality will not help us. Instead it must be a “we are all in together mentality.”

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

May 17, 2020

Spiritual Ponderings

Corona Virus & the Sacraments

I am using an article that I read to guide my reflections on the Church and the Corona Virus. The article is called: “Epidemic Danger and Catholic Sacraments” and was written by a theologian named Thomas Joseph White. I felt God asking me to use this article as a stepping off point for my own reflections on what this strange time of “social distancing” means for the Church. Quotes from his article will be in bold and my commentary and reflections will be in normal font. *Thomas Joseph White, O.P., is director of the Thomistic Institute in Rome.*

There are many other medieval and early modern examples that could be cited, but much more recently, in 1918, the churches in many parts of the United States closed for public worship during the Spanish Flu. In New Orleans (hardly a Protestant city) the city ordered that churches had to close, which did prompt some outcry from Catholic pastors who said that this had not been done during earlier epidemics. They were in error. Old moral theology manuals classically indicate that one of the reasons a priest can celebrate mass privately without a server is due to plague, which shows that earlier moralists understood that priests might not be able to celebrate publicly during such times. The bottom line is that the Catholic Church generally did whatever was reasonable to prevent the spread of disease and to comply with rational city ordinances. It chafed a little and pushed back against things that seemed unreasonable, but when it needed to suspend gatherings for mass, it did so. By contrast, in 1918 some Christian Scientists in the U.S. refused to close churches based on the premise of their spiritual superiority, and argued that if they were pious enough, the gathering would not be affected by the illness, nor would they transmit it to others. Here nature is replaced by an appeal to permanent miracle, and common sense and natural reason have given way to vain spiritual presumption. This is what good old-fashioned theology calls a heresy.

Jesus in the temptation stories tells the devil that “it is not good to put the Lord your God to the test.” And throughout the Gospels He is always confronted by the Pharisees and Scribes demanding that He perform some sort of miracle. This normally happens right after He had performed an amazing miracle like the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. May be the miracle that He has performed in these cases is create creatures (human beings) with the capacity to overcome these problems using their reason and intellect. Remember God did not create illness and natural disasters. These happen because sin throws the world into Chaos. Jesus did though conquer sin and death and walks with us even during these hard times.

Secondly, it is in fact seriously unethical to attribute to the leaders of the Catholic Church the principal intention of selfishly trying to protect themselves from getting sick. (The technical word here is “calumny.”) Bishops and priests do have the right to try to avoid getting sick, as a matter of fact, and it is a natural right that cannot be denied to them even if one disagrees with their prudential decisions. More to the point, they also can infect older members of their communities who will be likely to die. (As I write this, two older Dominican priests I know have died from the virus this past week, and dozens of others are struggling with the illness. I wonder how many of my confreres will have to die before critics will concede that it is reasonable for younger priests who live in rectories with them to take serious precautions?) But this set of concerns, while legitimate, is in fact secondary. The primary issue the bishops are concerned with is the protection of others. This virus spreads through social contact, purely and simply. Often those who have it are asymptomatic and can transmit it even when they think they are healthy enough to say mass or attend mass. If priests have public masses, and then they visit anyone who is older than 50, or if they visit the sick and

then say public masses, they will help spread the illness both indirectly (by gathering people together) and directly (by becoming transmitters). Under these conditions the temporary suspension of public masses is not only reasonable, but strongly morally defensible.

I remember a priest giving a homily saying that “he wished that his wishing would make pizza nonfattening but alas he knew no matter how much he wished traditional pizza would never be nonfattening. I wish this virus was not transmitted the way that it is but it is. I wish that I could say Mass with all of you in the pews but not if it meant that I was responsible for the death of any of you.

In saying this I am presuming that some essential services can and should be made available to the laity, such as keeping churches open for public prayer or Eucharistic adoration with spatial distancing. Churches should be able to provide confessions in safe circumstances, facilitate anointings, and carry out private marriage ceremonies and baptisms, all under the guidance of due prudence. I'm also presuming that the measures enacted by the bishops are temporary, as clearly, they are intended to be. A worldwide pandemic of this nature is not an ordinary event, and thus leads to many uncertainties in the short and long term. That the Church should suspend public masses temporarily is defensible as the most reasonable course of action given the novel and unpredictable nature of the illness. It is objectively the best course in such circumstances to err on the side of safety in the protection of life. This gives one time to re-evaluate. Once the quarantine reaches some initial degree of success, standards of practice will evolve and there will be questions of how to safely re-engage public sacramental practices while minimizing public risks. This is not bourgeois reasoning. It is prudential public responsibility.

When I get really frustrated with everything, I remind myself that a month (two months) is really not that long of a time in an institution that has lasted for close to 2,000 years. It is a reminder to me that most of what irritates me is that I do not have control of the future. I don't know when “normal” will be here or even what “normal” will look like. I then remind myself that it is not my job to know. It is my job to remain holy during this time. What I mean by “holy” is to “love everyone as God loves them.” How am I doing that to the best of my ability.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

May 26, 2020

Spiritual Ponderings

Corona Virus & the Sacraments

I am using an article that I read to guide my reflections on the Church and the Corona Virus. The article is called: “Epidemic Danger and Catholic Sacraments” and was written by a theologian named Thomas Joseph White. I felt God asking me to use this article as a stepping off point for my own reflections on what this strange time of “social distancing” means for the Church. Quotes from his article will be in bold and my commentary and reflections will be in normal font. *Thomas Joseph White, O.P., is director of the Thomistic Institute in Rome.*

We might ask, what should we be doing as a Church in this time, one that is extremely trying for a great number of people, both religious and non-religious alike? Currently around 1800 to 2000 people are dying in the U.S. daily from this virus, the vast majority of whom would not have died if it had not broken out three months ago. These are not mere statistics. These are people's parents, brothers and sisters, children, friends, and loved ones... Currently priests like myself (father lives in Rome) are being contacted daily by people struggling with the illness or with the death of loved ones. We are living in a time that is deeply troubling for many of our fellow human beings.

Are we ready to share our faith like never before? Are we willing to help people mourn? Will we be there to comfort them? I am trying to think of ways that I can help people. How can you bring Christ's love to those around you.

In this context the instinctual move of some conservative Christian commentators to practice social criticism while fomenting division among priests, bishops, and laity is spiritually corrosive. (What does it do to a priest's soul, by the way, when we incite him to break the vow he made to God to obey his bishop?) Nor is it helpful to utter the tone-deaf claim that the COVID-19 pandemic is not so bad and that people are overreacting. People are not overreacting when they grieve as their patients, friends, or family members die by the thousands. In fact, the Christian message in this context is one of basic evangelical hope. What we are to learn first in this crisis is that there is life after death, that God loves those who die, that there is the possibility of the forgiveness of sins, that our littleness in the face of death is also an opportunity for surrender, that Christ too died alone from asphyxiation and that he was raised from the

dead, that God can comfort the fearful, and that there is a promise of eternal life. In the face of death, Christians should be precisely those who put first things first.

I would like to respond to the above quote with two quotes from Helen Alexander's book: *Experiencing Bereavement*:

Death, no matter how it comes—whether expected or completely out of the blue—is an outrage. It can shake us to our very core and make us question the purpose of life itself. Why are we born, if only to die? Why love, if it only results in pain? How can someone be here one minute and irrevocably gone the next?

Death makes us question the meaning of life itself. It also stirs up all kinds of strong and overwhelming emotions: anger at the person who has died; resentment at the apparent unfairness of it all—"Why me? I've never done anyone any harm"; guilt at all the things that happened over the years, which resulted in arguments; or guilt again at having taken that person for granted.

Yet death is inextricably a part of life. On an intellectual level we all know about death and why, wryly, "Well, the one thing for certain about life is death." But on an emotional level, death appalls us. It takes from us people who are part of our lives, and it removes from us people that we love. We might have faith that we will see our loved ones again, or we might believe that we will never see them again. Either way we are left with a sense of uncertainty. And in the meantime, life goes on and somehow we need to live without the person or people whom death has stolen from us.

The process of adapting to profound feelings of loss, of dealing with an overwhelming sensation of grief, and of beginning to live again is known as bereavement.

and

In Jesus' life on earth we see God caring deeply about the things that make human being hurt—sickness, being a social outcast, being lost. In his life, his ministry, and his death, Jesus shows us a God who is with us in our pain, and who knows our being at its very worst.

The message of Jesus is a simple one: heal the sick, accept the outcast, and find the lost. In other words, love one another, just as your Father in heaven loves you.

Time after time, though, that message is ignored, and some of the most tragic sequences in human history have resulted—not from a vengeful God determined to punish his erring people, but from our own willfulness and selfishness.

Suffering is not the opposite of love, but rather an integral and productive part of it.

So let us value life—all of it. Life is a gift from God. As we laugh and cry, love and argue, let us live it as fully as we can. We can't hoard it; we can't lock it in a safety deposit box. We never know when it may end. And on the days when the pain of loving caused by death seems too much to bear, we can draw courage from the knowledge that God shares it all with us. He mourns with us, he strengthens us, and he helps us prepare for the day when we, too, will enter into the glory of the kingdom that lies beyond this world. Then, we will fully understand why we are born, and live and die.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

May 31, 2020

Spiritual Ponderings

Corona Virus & the Sacraments

I am using an article that I read to guide my reflections on the Church and the Corona Virus. The article is called: "Epidemic Danger and Catholic Sacraments" and was written by a theologian named Thomas Joseph White. I felt God asking me to use this article as a stepping off point for my own reflections on what this strange time of "social distancing" means for the Church. Quotes from his article will be in bold and my commentary and reflections will be in normal font. *Thomas Joseph White, O.P., is director of the Thomistic Institute in Rome.*

Second, Christians ought to treat this pandemic as an opportunity to learn more about God. What does it mean that God has permitted (or willed) temporary conditions in which our elite lifestyle of international travel is grounded, our consumption is cut to a minimum, our days are occupied with basic responsibilities toward our families and immediate communities, our resources and economic hopes are reduced, and we are made more dependent upon one another? What does it mean that our nation-states suddenly seem less potent and our armies are infected by an

invisible contagion they cannot eradicate, and that the most technologically advanced countries face the humility of their limits? Our powerful economies are suddenly enfeebled, and our future more uncertain.

In my prayers, I have been comparing this time to what the Jewish people at the time of the exile must have felt like when the kingdom of Judah and the kingdom of Israel were defeated and they were exiled from the Promise Land. I also think about how God brought them back to the Promise Land and I am finding inspiration from the story of Nehemiah. I do believe that I am more humble now than I was before all of this happened and that is never a bad thing. This experience has also reminded me that I cannot put God in a box and His ways are not my way.

Priests and bishops are confronted with a new obligation to seek interiority over activism as their sacramental ministry is rendered less potent, and laypeople have to find God outside the sacraments in their own interior lives, discovering new ways to be grateful for what they have rather than disdainful in the face of what they lack. We might think none of this tells us anything about ourselves, or about God's compassion and justice. But if we simply seek to pass through all this in hasty expectation of a return to normal, perhaps we are missing the fundamental point of the exercise.

The people of Israel in the Old Testament saw their time in exile as a call from God to be more faithful to the Ten Commandments. Can we see this time as a call from God to be more faithful to the Law of Love? Next year at this time, will people notice in us a change for the better?

Finally, what can Christians do to console both their religious and secular neighbors? What about the people heroically risking their own lives to serve others at this time, or those who are ill and afraid, especially those who do not have a religious recourse or perspective? What about those grieving, or those who are isolated? How can we be creative in our hope and empathy?

It is sad that the first couple of YouTube videos I sent out and the first Mass we uploaded to the internet, certain parishioners (who I predicted) instead of thanking us for trying something new complained about the quality of the sound or something else. I was just glad that I was not quarantined with them. Will our family and the people we interacted with during this time think that their relationship with you is stronger because of this shared experience or not? How can we help to improve these relationships now? These are questions that I also ask of myself.

Bishops, priests, and laity alike should work together in the coming months to discern how we can safely return progressively to the public celebration of sacraments, and have interim steps of public worship in limited ways. But we should also be thinking about how to communicate Christian hope and basic human friendship and compassion to people who suffer, in our words and gestures, both individually and collectively. The life of the heart is as real as the life of the mind, and in our current moment, for however long it should last, charity is itself the most basic prophetic activity. "By this they will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35). I'm citing him because in this and in every other case, his authority comes first.

Watching people leave the Church before the virus was tough, now we will have to work twice as hard to bring them back. This does not mean we have to be twice as "right" but rather it means we must be twice as loving!