

From the Pastor—March 29, 2020

In These Days It's not often in my years as a pastor, from 1999 till the present, that I have not produced a weekly column in the bulletin. Last week was one of those weeks. I was in a mode of turning every which way, trying to land upon solutions for current questions, moment by moment. I wish to speak to you the timeline of my last couple of weeks.

March 14-15 For the weekend of March 14-15, our Parish Council at St. Mary's and our church caretakers at St. Joseph's were so good to assist us with their help in keeping social distance in church for Mass and for sanitizing surfaces afterward. I really appreciate their efforts. That weekend, Archbishop Lucas had dispensed everyone from the obligation of attending Sunday Mass. This was for the Diocese of Lincoln and the Omaha Archdiocese. Bishop Hanefeldt of Grand Island extended the same dispensation from attending Mass.

March 16 At the State of Nebraska medical officials urging/requirement, social gatherings were not to exceed 10 people. This development essentially shuttered our churches from public Mass. My daily Mass that morning at 7:30 a.m. was my last public Mass up to this writing.

March 17 For St. Patrick's Day, I began using the function "Facebook Live" to film my daily Mass. It continues to be a work in progress, meaning that what I am doing is by no means a professional recording. However, I have received many encouraging words from people who appreciate seeing the Mass via Facebook. The recording is then posted to my personal page to be watched at a person's convenience.

March 17 – 20 A series of e-mails hit my in-box from our Chancery office in Lincoln, instructing me and all priests on how to handle the new situation. Through these notes, I realized that as many as 35% of priests who offer Mass in our parishes are in the 60 and over age range said to be most at risk to suffer most from infection by the coronavirus. This made more sense of the suspension of public Masses, as I saw the point of needing to keep our priests healthy. During these days, I started to delve into using Facebook Live for more times of prayer, such as the Liturgy of the Hours prayed from my Breviary. With good wi-fi in the rectory, I became able to pray with you, either live or by posting it to my page for you to watch on your own time.

March 21 For Saturday vigil Mass, I was set up to assist people who might want to go to Confession. I put up a make-shift confession area on the front sidewalk in front of St. Mary's main doors (where our children like to play four-square). I also had a collection basket set up. Several people showed up, even though there was no Mass. They prayed in church for a while and then left.

March 22 The Sunday morning for Masses was quite strange. I recorded my Mass at St. Mary's, and my profile page on Facebook said it received 234 views of people watching it. I was available for Confessions. I then drove to Giltner to St. Joseph's at about the usual time and offered Confessions. I offered a private Mass in the sacristy. After I got home from Giltner, I prepared my car to go to the city square in Aurora to hold Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament from 3:00 – 4:00 p.m. I had posted this as an occurrence, titled "Prayer on the Square", on Friday or Saturday. So, it was last minute and only on my own initiative. My idea was that people could pull up in a parking place and adore Jesus from their car. Or, they could set up lawn chairs with ample room for social distancing. I had a little altar, with a cloth and electric candlestick candles. I brought the monstrance from

church and carried the Blessed Sacrament within my Communion call pouch. I brought my own lawn chair and prayed. The square was not real active with people, being a Sunday. People who did drive by were able to see Jesus and know his loving presence, even if they didn't really understand the concept. For us as Catholics, it was either ludicrous for me to sit there for an hour in silence...or it was having an audience with the King and Lord of the universe. The latter is the truth.

March 23 – 24 I assisted with the Spirit Catholic Radio Care-a-thon fundraiser by driving into Lincoln to appear on the 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. shift. It is quite the blessing to be asked to help with live radio. I was paired with co-host Jessica Morehead, who grew up in my home parish after my time. She, however, reported on-air that my mother had been a substitute teacher for her class at St. Joseph's School!

March 23 – 27 I continued to record daily Mass and Liturgy of the Hours prayers. I also recorded a couple of Rosaries. I figured out how to send e-mails in a group to many of you. I sent out three (I think) e-mails to the group list, placing your addresses under Bcc: (blind carbon copy). Our database had right at 180 valid e-mail addresses for St. Mary's and St. Joseph's combined. I gave encouragement and instructions in these e-mails. I also instructed our CCD and Godteens coordinators that we would follow diocesan directives by not grouping students on Wednesdays for the time being. However, the Godteens were going to try to come together on-line via Zoom or Skype. The CCD students in grades K-8 have some curriculum ideas for parents from the Religious Education Office and Father Andrew Heaslip.

Myself, My Family, My Take So far, I am healthy...thanks be to God! My mom and dad are doing ok on our family farm. I asked a parishioner at St. Joe's to visit them and bring them some groceries; I so appreciated her efforts! My brother and sister, too, are doing well. Mary has battled a sinus infection, but it is improving. William is off from school at Pius and is trying to master on-line lesson taking. This is a tall order for a student who is not the most studious; perhaps some of you parents can relate to my sister in this instance? Mark helped Will one night with some of his on-line work from Pius' faculty. My take on all of this is more than I can say here. It has alarmed me when I hear of public people like Tom Hanks and Prince Charles testing positive for COVID-19. It has alarmed me to see on the internet one bishop and at least 10 priests perishing from the virus, none of whom are U.S. citizens. I have found myself practicing gratitude for the food I eat. My heart has ached for students who by now are seeing that this is not like any snow-day experience they may have ever hoped and prayed for. Our youth, grades pre-K to 12th grade to college, probably miss school and relationships and extracurricular activities. Many of you have seen your very lives turned upside down because of restrictions, and perhaps even unemployment. I can only say, keep your eyes fixed on Jesus; try to see his love pouring into you.

God Bless You!!!

Father Grell