

MESSAGE BEFORE THE WEEKEND MASSES (March 14,15, 2020)

In these past several days we have received advice from medical professionals pertaining to how we can and should act responsibly with regard to the coronavirus. We have also received some regulations both from state and church leadership. I'd like to address some of these issues. The first thing that I would like to suggest is that perhaps now more than ever we might listen with attentive ears to what God has revealed to us through Jesus. We find in the Gospels where Jesus often spoke these words: "Be not afraid." He also told his disciples "My peace I give to you." Jesus was offering encouragement when he spoke those words. I believe that He offers the same encouragement to us today. We don't need to be afraid; instead, we need to be concerned and we should take proper precautions. There is no need for panic; rather, we can trust in Jesus who calmed the storms, who cured the sick – and who said He would be with us always. In other words, we can be at peace.

The coronavirus is a serious matter and has shown itself to have severe consequences if we do not give it proper attention. At the same time, medical professionals are advising that we not over-react. We are reminded that proper hygiene will go a long way in preventing the virus from becoming severe. They tell us to wash our hands with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds and to do this frequently. They also tell us to use disinfectants on surfaces that our hands touch. They advise us not to put our hands to our faces and they tell us to think about social distancing from one another, which is especially significant, they say, for those who are most vulnerable to the more serious consequences of the virus. The most vulnerable, they tell us, are folks over 60 years of age and who have pre-existing or underlying medical issues that can affect the ability to breathe.

Bishop Callahan has given us some directives for our parishes in the La Crosse Diocese. He wants us to discontinue the Sign of Peace during the Mass. He has also mandated that the distribution of the Precious Blood in the form of the consecrated wine should be suspended. Therefore, we will only receive Holy Communion under the one form of the consecrated host. Bishop also recommends at this time that we should consider receiving Holy Communion in the hand rather than on the tongue – although he also says that no one should be denied who still wish to receive on the tongue. Further, he wants all holy water fonts to be emptied – again because of the contact that the virus could have when contact is made with our hands. Many of us walk into the church and immediately sign ourselves with holy water. Even though the holy water fonts are emptied, making the Sign of the Cross is still a good way to enter into God's presence here in the church building.

Bishop Callahan also has said that if anyone is ill, they are under no obligation to attend Mass and should remain at home until they recover from their illness. He also stated that if someone feels well, but is concerned about the coronavirus threat because of age or a health condition or other reasons, those persons are *dispensed from the Sunday obligation* for the time being. In other words, the Holy Mass will be offered but the obligation to attend is lifted until we are

further notified. He reminds us that if we cannot or choose not to attend Mass in person, the televised Mass is broadcast in our area.

Governor Evers has issued a statement indicating the closing of grade schools and high schools throughout the state of Wisconsin. That will begin in the next few days and continue for at least a couple of weeks. This means that we will be suspending all activities at St. Mary's School – both during the school day and with activities like Religious Education for the grade school and high school students.

Some people are saying that the coronavirus pandemic is a chastisement from God for sin in the world. Since none of us knows the mind of God, we cannot say that with any certainty. We know from stories in the Bible that God has chastised in order to turn folks away from sin. If this is some form of chastisement, we certainly have merited that. At the same time, perhaps this crisis may include some unforeseen blessings. For example, it may bring us closer to God in prayer. It may remind us that helping one another is the way that Christ wants us to live. It may allow people to live a more simple life and may bring family members closer to one another. All of those would be blessings. We don't know what God has in store – but we can be convinced that God is with us and that He loves us. Trust that God knows what is in our hearts and that He will bless us in ways we may not yet know.

One final thought ... because of the coronavirus we are concerned about our bodies and that is a good concern. However, the Lenten season reminds us to be concerned as well about our souls and how sin has infected our souls. While trying to keep infections away from our bodies is very important since God wants our bodies to be temples of His Holy Spirit, how much more important should be the concern for our souls. Our bodies are important – but they will eventually die. Our souls, however, are immortal. The concern for the coronavirus coming during the season of Lent can remind us that we should have equal if not more concern for our souls and how to keep them healthy or restore them to good health.

The global effect of the coronavirus reminds us that this is a time to call upon the healing power of Jesus. It's also a good time to entrust ourselves to the protection of Our Blessed Mother. With that in mind, I'd like us to pray together the "*Memorare*" as we ask Our Blessed Mother to intercede for us in this matter. "Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it known that anyone who fled to your protection, implored your help or sought your intercession was left unaided. Inspired by this confidence, I fly unto you, O Virgin of virgins, my mother; to thee I come, before thee I stand, sinful and sorrowful. O Mother of the Word Incarnate, despise not my petitions, and in your mercy hear and answer me. Amen."

In conclusion, Jesus told His disciples not to be afraid and He also reminded them that He wanted them to be at peace. You will hear those words calling us to be at peace several times during the Mass today – and you will be reminded at the end of Mass to go in peace to love and serve the Lord and one another. Taking proper precautions but not panicking seems to be a

proper and good way to be at peace – and a way to love and serve the Lord and one another.
Let's enter now into the Holy Mass.

Father Joe Diermeier