

PASTOR'S CORNER

Plague Journal

From day to day, as the Spirit moves me, I will share with you certain theological reflections concerning the liturgy and its relation to the times we're in.

Good Friday, April 10: I reflect today on the fact that no Mass of any kind can be celebrated anywhere in the world either on this day or the following. This is in accordance with a long-standing tradition of the Church. This year, this reality is unhappily brought further home by the fact that most Catholics cannot even receive Holy Communion not only on these days but during both Lent and Eastertide as well. As an aside, I have felt it might not be the worst idea to abstain from communion on both Good Friday and Holy Saturday as we prepare for the glory of Easter. This year, for most of you, this has been the case! From the evening of Holy Thursday until the Easter Vigil we keep watch, waiting prayerfully as it were at the tomb of the Lord. This is liturgically represented by the reposition of the reserved hosts in an "area of repose" located somewhere away from the now empty Tabernacle. At St. Therese, we locate this area in the prayer chapel contiguous to the church itself. Such reposition did not occur this year per instructions from the Holy See, so the entire feeling of 'keeping vigil' was changed (and not for the better).

One of the things pointed out to the Priests by Archbishop Sample is the frequent use of "rights" language in how some folks are dealing with the loss of the sacraments this Lent and Easter. In their not infrequent complaints to him this is often the position that some of these frustrated people take; namely that their rights are being trampled upon. This attitude speaks to their understandable frustration but also I think to a sense of entitlement all too prevalent in American culture. Please remember that it is a privilege to receive Holy Communion and not a right. Indeed, there are areas of the world wherein communion cannot be received for years on end by devout Catholics since they live where there are no Priests.

Our situation is different and has arisen because we have been asked to suspend our public worship for a time in a communal effort to "flatten the curve" and save lives from the scourge of the corona virus. To be clear, I too have been somewhat quick to speak of religious rights or to assert the essential nature of what Catholics do at Mass. I still believe that to be true, but I've softened a bit as I've reflected more deeply on the nature of just what it means to be a person whose religious identity (Christian) is derived from the fact that I have been anointed with the Spirit of God and as such have been asked to witness to the Gospel of Christ in whom I have been reborn. As people united to Christ in the Spirit, is it such a burden to be asked to forgo our worship and the reception of the Holy Eucharist for a time? A burden, yes. But cannot it not be one we willingly and lovingly agree to bear with Christ? Fr. Thomas Joseph White captures this spirit in a blog he posted on the First Things website in response to those of others bemoaning the closure of churches in a time of plague (as I have likewise done):

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. 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.

... *discovering new ways to be grateful* ... I know these words convict me as I recall how I whined and fretted about the loss of public worship and the closing in upon itself of my own life. I have come to see myself as being one marbled with a sense of entitlement and as being all too quick to complain when things suddenly don't go my own way. I'm sure that most of you have done far better than I in dealing with these disappointments. Please forgive any sense of petulance that might have crept into any of my prior thoughts about those of our leaders who chose to comply with the order of the Governor in an effort to help our fellow men here in Oregon and around the country.

Easter Sunday, April 12: The Easter fire is blessed as it blazes up from the tip of a long wooden match. From it the Paschal Candle is lit for the first time and casts its weak light about the small, close chapel. The area in which I say the Mass is guarded by a cloth icon of Our Lady which lends the space it encloses a certain quiet distance from the rest of the room. Over the altar a sky-light allows sunlight to shine down upon and illuminate its surface. A garish wall-mounted neon strip light can be turned on if needed. Thankfully it is not on this sunny Easter day.

Upon the altar there is only a corporal anchored by a Roman Missal. To the right and tucked behind a poor man's rood screen is the chair I use at Mass next to which is a small credence table. I bow and kiss the altar as always and intone the Entrance Antiphon. Here as elsewhere in the Easter Mass the word Alleluia! is prevalent. After I croak out the Gloria and pray the Collect, I sit. There is no lector, so I read the readings quietly and reflectively to myself. I then sing the Easter sequence and marvel at the profundity of the events it relates. It is an ancient and simple melody. I stand for the Easter Alleluia and proclaim the Gospel. There is no homily as I preach to myself constantly and don't need to carve out a special time here. I reflect for a time on the quiet of the chapel and its simple beauty.

Martin is with me again, but he is far better behaved and lies at my feet (more or less).

The Eucharist unfolds per normal with the dog anxiously whining from time to time for attention. I try to ignore him, but fail (as he knows I will!) Receiving communion, I spend some time reflecting that you all cannot and hold the community in my heart. The first of the great Easter Octave Masses ends with the double 'alleluia' and all (including you!) are asked to 'go in peace'.