

PulledQuote: “With every hardship or sadness, our Lord offers grace to sustain us and to draw us closer to himself. The current pandemic can be a wake-up call and remind us of our dependence on God. It can also remind us of our reliance on each other and move us to a greater spirit of compassion.” –Bishop John Folda

Headline: Reflections in a time of pandemic

By the time this edition of *New Earth* arrives in homes, we will be well into our second month of “social distancing” due to the coronavirus outbreak. And it looks like we will also be that much closer to resuming some form of ordinary life in our parishes and our homes. Some adjustments in our routine will be necessary for a while, so “normal” might look a little different to all of us. But life will continue.

Some have assumed that the decision to suspend Masses and other activities of the Church during this pandemic was due to a lack of faith, or that we no longer trust in God’s ability to save us. Nothing could be further from the truth. God gave us the power of common sense and prudence, and out of prudence we have taken radical steps to address a very real risk. History tells us that we have been in this situation before. During the 1918 outbreak of the Spanish flu, bishops all over our country closed churches on the advice of public health officials to limit the spread of the disease. In those places where such precautions were not taken, many more people lost their lives. Even further back in time, St. Charles Borromeo, the Archbishop of Milan, similarly closed all churches in his diocese during the plague outbreak of 1576. Those bishops had the same concern for the safety of their people that we have today. The Church is serious about protecting the lives of the faithful and the wider society, so sometimes we have to take drastic and unwanted measures in our effort to look out for one another.

A few people have wondered if this coronavirus is some kind of punishment from God. This is one of many natural disasters that afflict our world every year, not to mention the countless instances of cancer, heart disease, stroke, flu, and other illnesses. It’s always risky to attribute a calamity or misfortune to God’s wrath. (See for instance the example of the man born blind in John 9:2.) But I have no doubt that God can use such events to get us to listen to his voice and reform our decisions and behaviors in light of his teachings.

The coronavirus has reminded us once again of the frailty of our human condition. We may imagine at times that we are invincible, and we want to be in control. But this pandemic makes it clear that there are forces we cannot control, and we are still the same fragile human beings we have always been. Such an experience can be disconcerting, but it can also be enlightening if we are willing to see it through the eyes of faith. We can learn a new form of trust, realizing that there is great peace in placing our lives in the loving hands of God. In times of adversity, it’s always good to recall what we read in Isaiah, that the Lord holds us in the palm of his hand (Is 49:16). When we forget that we are his children, and that he is the giver of life, we can expect to be regularly frustrated.

With so many of our usual diversions, like sports, social events, and entertainment put on hold, this could be a great opportunity for additional prayer and meditation. So many of us complain about being too busy and not having enough time, but this might be just the chance we need to make more time for personal prayer. Perhaps we can set aside daily time for bible-reading, or praying the rosary as a family, or making a visit to church to adore Jesus in the Eucharist. Our world is in need of healing, and many people are suffering during this pandemic. Our prayers of intercession can be especially powerful in easing their suffering and restoring their hope.

Our Lord might also be reminding us of the call to charity and concern for each other. Our acts of social distancing, and even our suspension of public Masses and Church activities can be traced to our Lord’s commandment to “love our neighbor.” The Church has always taught us to be concerned for the common good of all, and such concern is especially needed now. This may be an opportunity to reach out to someone who is alone, a chance to break the loneliness and isolation that others might be experiencing, even after things begin to open up. A simple phone call to someone who is ill or elderly, or even a quick visit at the front door, can be a welcome gift at a time like this. I am edified and grateful for the many creative acts of charity and kindness that I have seen and heard about during this trying time.

We should not make light of the genuine hardship that many people are experiencing due to this pandemic. In a few short months, COVID-19 has become the second leading cause of death in our country, and millions are struggling with unemployment, poverty, fear, and loneliness. But with every hardship or sadness, our Lord offers grace to sustain us and to draw us closer to himself. The current pandemic can be a wake-up call and remind us of our dependence on God. It can also remind us of our reliance on each other and move us to a greater spirit of compassion.

We will all be happy to gather once again for the celebration of Mass and the ordinary public life of our faith community. No matter how long this pandemic continues, let us be attentive to the promptings of God, and let us continue to support and pray for one another.