

# **Some Best *Pastoral* Practices in a Time of Covid-19 Coronavirus**

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## **Faith over Fear! Keep Evangelizing!**

In this time of Covid-19 Coronavirus pandemic, the clergy and all of the baptized are called to be witnesses of strength, courage, and faith. The first priority of the Church should be the spiritual health of the faith community but that priority cannot be divorced from the physical and mental health of them as well especially during Covid-19 virus pandemic. While listening to sound medical, governmental, and ecclesial directives clergy and lay leaders should model a calm, non-anxious presence in times of fear and chaos. Parish, clergy, and staff activities, attitudes, and directions should not oppose Center for Disease Control and Prevention, federal, state, local and ecclesial mandates. The Church, parishes, and related ministries should provide rational and reliable leadership to people who are infected or affected with the virus. In the midst of sadness and death, members of the Church have the opportunity to be the healing power Christ to others. Modeling and maintaining a normalcy about the pastoral life of our Church and the care of people can go a long way to reassure and help those in the midst of uncertainty, to live in trust, confidence, and hope in Christ's promise to be with us always.

What follows are some insights that have arisen when speaking with some pastors, other clergy, and lay leaders in the Archdiocese as well as Evangelization colleagues in other parts of the United States.

## **We Always Begin with Prayer**

Catholic Christians, as disciples of Jesus, have always joined in prayer during times of plague and illness throughout the ages, ministered to the sick, attended to the dying and burying the dead. May we do the same today in this pandemic by loving God and our neighbor. In times like this, we have the opportunity to follow Jesus's command to love God and our neighbor. Let us continue to pray for everyone involved; the sick, their families, the first responders and healthcare professionals – especially as we continue our Lenten journey.

As Pope Francis reminds us, we should be reaching out to our communities and praying in solidarity with the Church around the world. He said, "Let us pray to the Lord also for our priests, that they may have the courage to go out and go to the sick people to bring the strength of God's word and the Eucharist and accompany the health workers and volunteers in this work that they are doing."

## **Informed Church Leaders, Urge Education, Caution and Common Sense as Coronavirus Cases Increase.**

What is accurate information? With the abundance of information, photos and videos shared across social media and news outlets, it can be challenging to decipher fact from fiction. The World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) are two sources with trusted medical professionals. By now, we know the following:

+Wash your hands frequently with soap and water for at least 20 seconds or using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains 60%–95% alcohol immediately after coughing, sneezing (into your elbow) or blowing your nose.

+Use hand sanitizer.

+Avoid touching your face, nose and eyes with unwashed hands.

+Disinfect surfaces used regularly.

+Avoid close contact with someone who is infected.

+Practice these precautionary measures at home and pass this information along to family and friends.

+Avoid contact with others, keeping social distancing which is 6 feet apart. No gatherings of groups larger than 10 people.

+Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or your sleeve when coughing or sneezing.

## **Communication**

In this fast-paced crisis, communicating early and often with various Church constituencies is vital. Pastors are encouraged to communicate with staff, school administrators, parishioners, and benefactors. When communicating be succinct and as transparent as possible. Explain what you know, what you do not know and your sources of information. Some questions for consideration:

- Is your Church recognized as reliable sources of information about the coronavirus?
- Does the parish voicemail recording and the opening slide of your website communicate clearly the local Church policy and practices about cancelled liturgies, parish gatherings, Friday Lenten Fish-Fry, educational gatherings, and other programs and services? Does it explain and share the Act of Spiritual Communion?
- With furloughed Office Staff, are there clear and direct lines of access to the pastor, other clergy, and essential staff, to prevent callers from getting lost in phone trees?
- Offices and Meeting Spaces: Even with limited staff is there an increased diligence to clean and disinfect all areas such as offices, bathrooms, common areas, light switches, shared electronic equipment like tablets, touch screens, keyboards, and remote controls to prevent transmission?

- Is there office and Church signage inviting all to practice social distancing?
- If Churches are left open for private prayer is hand sanitizer provided, and sanitized wipes for pews, chairs, railings, door knobs, elevator buttons--all to prevent the transmission of the virus which can live on surfaces for three hours? Parishioners and those stopping to pray will appreciate this.

## **Digital Pastoral Care**

Dioceses across the world have canceled in-person Masses and services in response to the growing COVID-19 pandemic. This new reality has created a massive new viewership for televised and livestreamed Masses and other rituals, as Catholic leaders in the Archdiocese of New Orleans and other places swiftly met the spiritual need. For some clergy there was a learning curve. In some instances, more people are watching the Mass now than were sitting in the pews before the pandemic. This is a great opportunity to Evangelize. Some thoughts for digital pastoral care:

- Share digital listings for all Churches in the diocese that live-stream daily and Sunday Masses. This information is found on the diocesan webpage.
- Parishes and ministries are broadcasting the Holy Mass online, on radio and television as the Archdiocese invites all to become Disciples of Christ by digitally joining local and universal celebrations of the Mass.
- Just like before for attending any other Mass, all are invited to tune in a bit earlier to prepare for Mass -- striving for "full, conscious, and active participation" in the Sacred Liturgy. Individuals can read the scriptures for the Mass in advance on the United States Catholic Bishop's site <http://uscgb.org/bible/readings>. Several streams support TV video casting (Facebook, YouTube, etc.). All can be viewed on a phone, tablet or computer. Some parishes record their Masses and post them afterwards.
- Other digital prayer opportunities include the Stations of the Cross, Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, Scripture Reflections, and the praying of the Rosary or Chaplet of Divine Mercy, etc.
- Connect with the local Catholic Radio Station and Catholic newspaper for additional resources.

## **Digital Small Groups**

Promote small digital groups like: Men's and Women's faith groups, RCIA, Bible Studies, Alpha in a Catholic Context, Adult Faith Formation Groups, Youth and Young Adult Groups, and even choir practice, to name but a few, meet on Zoom to continue their ministry and formation but now they meet online.

## **Pastoral Care by Phone**

In many respects, electronic devices now define our lives. Whether it be the personal computer, a notepad, television or the latest smart phone — devices have changed the ways we communicate. New forms of communication are being birthed all the time. No doubt, these tools influence ministry, and continue to challenge how ministry and communication evolve in our modern world.

However, it is also true that the more things change the more they stay the same. Often older forms of communication can have the greatest impact in ministry because people either forget about them or find them to be stirring or more personable than the latest technological fads or alternatives.

In this time of Codvid-19, with all the wonderful opportunities to reach out digitally to parishioners for prayer and ministry the strategy that seems to be the best received is **a telephone call**. It seems that the phone can be a powerful pastoral tool and a bridge to a relationship. One parishioner spoke of her phone call with her pastor this way: “I never thought that I was important enough for my pastor to call me. I feel like he really cares.”

Might the pastor, parochial vicar, deacons, repurposed staff members as well as Pastoral Council members divide the parish database and phone each family? A script could be written where all identify themselves as calling from the parish and then ask how the individual or family is doing; second, what their prayer needs or requests might be, and lastly, confirm their email addresses. For every hand we do not shake because of social distancing, I hope that we can make a phone call instead to remain connected to our people.

## **Pastoral Care for the Sick and Grief Care**

When the entire Church community cares for the sick, it serves Christ himself in the suffering members of his Mystical Body. Caring for the sick is one of the Corporal Works of Mercy found in Matthew 25. The Church shows this solicitude by visiting those in poor health, sharing the love of God through the scriptures and by celebrating the sacraments especially the Eucharist.

In this time of the virus with access to hospitals, nursing homes, and health care facilities being limited or eliminated, are there ways that you can give pastoral care and visits to the sick digitally. Zoom, Facebook, WhatsApp, and FaceTime might provide an opportunity to speak and pray with the sick person. This is similar if someone should be ill with the virus in his or her own home.

The celebration of the Anointing of the Sick is one component of pastoral care. In regards to this Sacrament, the Office of Worship recently sent an instruction to the clergy,

*“In these difficult pastoral circumstances in which sacramental ministry becomes difficult and even dangerous to the priest as minister, proper information must be provided to ministers of the sacraments to ensure both the safety of the minister and sacramental graces for those in need. Concerning the Anointing of the Sick, it is important to recognize a few principles and accommodations for the particular pastoral situations in which we find ourselves today because of the COVID-19 virus:*

- 1. The matter for the Anointing of the Sick is the blessed oil, not the laying on of hands.*
- 2. Therefore, it is acceptable to use an instrument to avoid direct contact to best ensure the safety of the minister. This is stated directly in the Code of Canon Law, Can. 1000 §2. The minister is to perform the anointing with his own hand, unless a grave reason warrants the use of an instrument.*

*Infectious disease is by definition a grave reason. Elongated cotton swabs are available at most pharmacies such as Rite Aid and Walgreens. Common ones come in 6-inch lengths or longer. Please do not put yourself at risk, but instead be safe in bringing the sacraments to those in need by using such instruments to avoid contamination and further spread of the disease. Please be sure to properly dispose of the swabs after use through burning. Also, be sure to wash your hands immediately after the anointing as additional precaution.”*

Sadly, some who contract the coronavirus pass away. The need for parish grief care will heighten, as some of the infected will die alone due to government regulations in health care facilities. Special care needs to occur for those grieving in this time of loss if they were not able to be at the bedside of their loved one who died alone. An additional complication is the limited number of people (ten) who can attend the deceased’s funeral. We as a faith community will be attending to these layers of grief and in some cases guilt that virus related deaths will cause for some time in the future. This sort of grief will need special attention. While clergy and other ministers cannot take away the sadness, some ministry options of pastoral care might be:

+ Clergy and others can make sure that a family is “checked in on” as many times as would be helpful for them. These calls might include scripture passages and prayers for the deceased.

+Communication about the parishioner’s death might be linked to the parish website so that others can pray for the deceased and his or her family. A photo and obituary might be included.

+ Food delivery options are limited but available, meals made by parishioners and restaurants can be delivered to a family’s door.

## **Responding to Our Neighbor’s Needs**

In times of crisis, when people are anxious and unsure, community support and accountability networks may fray. The church’s actions, through faith leaders and through the actions of the Body of Christ as a whole, can model for a wider community what it looks like to care for one another. Our response, following the example of Jesus, finds its source in the Corporal Works of Mercy (MT 25: 31-46). Some considerations:

- ***Responding to bias:*** At this time, there are reported increases in bias as individuals and groups try to shame and blame certain ethnic groups for the start of the virus. This racial/ethnically coded stigma is hurtful, inaccurate, and un-Christian. Faith leaders and their communities should do all in their power to interrupt racism, xenophobia, and fear when they see and hear it.
- ***Responding to economic fragility:*** It is wise to encourage all to prepare for possible illness by ensuring that they have additional over-the-counter medicine, tissues, cleaning products and an extra supply of your normal “I feel sick” food staples at their home. Some experts are also recommending buying a bit more than your usual weekly groceries, adding some nonperishables to keep in the cabinet in case of quarantine. For those who are not financially able to do this can the Church (St Vincent de Paul or a food pantry) assist people in the community who cannot afford to purchase extra groceries, medications or cleaning products, for example.
- ***Building social networks:*** Who are the overlooked people? Are there people nearby who live alone, are elderly, those with disabilities living in “group homes,” isolated from family or friends, and may not have much of a support network? Now is the time to reach out to them and ensure there are ways to connect with them, be open about needs, and plan to stay in touch.
- ***Reducing anxiety with accurate information:*** Are there people among you or near you who are fearful and fretting? Point them to accurate health department, government, and ecclesial information.

## **Develop a Continuation of a Business Plan.**

Finance leaders, with the pastor, should carefully plan ways to encourage congregants to make their donations and pledges. In a time when many have lost their jobs and millions have applied for unemployment how do we ask for financial support for the mission of the Gospel without making people feel guilty? With ministry as with life, you cannot have any outcome without income. The focus of the financial “ask” should be first, gratitude, and second, what we want *for* our parishioners not *from* them. As always, be honest with how the parish is being responsible with their gift. This could be framed in the question, “Who do you want to be on the other side of this virus?” This is a question about hope.

When connecting generosity with giving, give simple, clear instructions about the options open to members to assist in keeping the mission of the parish going. “Donate” links on the parish homepage and electronic giving are simple ways to assist but parishioners can be encouraged to mail checks or drop their donations at the parish office. Good pastoral wisdom dictates that the “ask” for money would not be the first communication with parishioners.

Leaders should be good stewards of the Church resources. While there are fixed monthly costs, can heat, air conditioning and lighting be adjusted as the Church and educational facilities sit

dormant? Should we be suspending or reducing contracts like lawn care and trash collection when facilities are closed? Talk to vendors and utility companies about reduced operations at the church due to closures. Can we fill in the gaps with volunteers? What other ways can the parish “tighten the belt” while continuing the missions?

## **Working Remotely but Staying Connected**

Who would have ever thought that the Church would go the way of Amazon, Facebook, Microsoft, Google, and others? However, we have. Many parishes have staff members working from home to support the ministry of the parish while following the government’s stay at home order. This present reality will call on pastors to keep the lines of communication open with those staff members and to ensure that they have the correct technology to complete what is expected of them. Some questions:

- + Should parish phone lines be forwarded to the pastor’s cell phone or to the home or cell phone of the secretary? Do voicemails clearly articulate that it is the Church line that callers are reaching?
- + Is there a different protocol for contacting the clergy for the Anointing of the Sick at home?
- + How are offertory envelopes opened and cash counted to meet Archdiocesan and parish finance policies to protect all those involved?

## **LEADERSHIP BACKUP**

- + Do pastors have backup options for themselves and other essential staff members in case they become ill or quarantined?
- + If a pastor is alone and contracts the virus, in addition to the quarantine that everyone is expected to keep, does he have a replacement to fill in on his live-streamed Masses or other services?
- + The same ‘substitute’ questions should be raised about a secretary or bookkeeper who is ill or quarantined. Are the others who can answer phones and to pay bills?

## **Conclusion**

Colleagues in the ministry, Pope Francis’ metaphor of the church as hospital tent in battle is a rich one and one that should speak to us in this time of coronavirus. Because we have studied it or experienced it ourselves we understand that the relationship between curing the body and caring for the soul lives in the anatomy of Christian tradition. These few reflections do not cover every aspect of ministry in this pandemic but are shared as a few best practices as together we

are about the mission of bringing healing and wholeness to God's people in new and different ways.

May God bless us and help us in this pandemic to cultivate specific Evangelizing practices that lead to an excellent way of serving the kingdom and God's people!

*Our Lady of Help of Christians, hasten to help us.*