

THE OTHER SIDE OF CORONA
A PASTORAL LETTER TO THE CHURCH OF PITTSBURGH
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MARCH 20, 2020

My dear Sisters and Brothers of the Church of Pittsburgh,

“The Other Side of Corona.” What a difference several months make. Since the virus known as “corona” entered center stage in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China last December, just the mere mention of the word *corona* invokes many emotions, most notable of all fear—fear of the virus, fear of disease, fear of sickness, fear of death.

As the coronavirus (COVID-19) touches our lives with uncertainty, confusion, fear and suffering, I invite you to reflect on a hope-filled definition of the word *corona* from the perspective of our faith—truly “The Other Side of Corona.”

For us Catholics, the word *corona* traditionally means the crown of Mary, who is praying for us always. *Corona* is a sign that God is with us through everything we experience in life, wherever we are, whatever we do, whoever we are! We are never alone. We have an everlasting hope.

Every time we think of this virus—as we must do in order to protect others and ourselves—the name *corona* can call you and me to prayer.

God works in all things to draw us closer to Him. At a time like this, God deeply desires to be closer to us. But He will never force Himself on us. We need to respond. A time of dramatic action that affects our daily lives—closure of business, working from home, cancelation of school,

a suspension of most Church activities, particularly the celebration of public Masses—and even a self-quarantine or the loss of employment—is an opportunity to deepen our relationship with Jesus. Whether or not the disease has afflicted you personally, it is affecting all of us—locally, nationally, globally.

And therein lies the need for us to come closer to God, to respond to His need to be with us more closely. Our response is to pray and to pray most fervently.

We pray:

- that God may protect us from a spread of the virus;
- that God may extend His love and care for others through us;
- that God may heal those who are ill;
- that God may guide our leaders through this pandemic;
- that God may be in the hearts of the medical professionals;
- that God may enlighten the researchers who are searching for a vaccine to work against the virus;
- that God may comfort all of us whose lives are disrupted in the path of the virus;
- that God may welcome into His embrace those who have died in the wake of the pandemic.

The word *corona* invites us also to think of prayer to Our Lady. An early name for the Rosary—still used in many parts of the world—is “*Corona del Rosario*” or “Crown of the Rosary.” Although prayer beads are an even older tradition, our Rosary stems from the devotion of a young man in the Middle Ages who wove crowns of roses to place on a statue of Our Lady. When he entered a religious community, he was distressed to learn that his duties would prevent

him from making the crowns. The Blessed Mother then appeared and told him that his Hail Marys were her crown of roses, her *Corona del Rosario*.

The way she taught him to pray this *Corona del Rosario* grew so popular that all Catholic prayer beads became known as “rosaries.” Over the centuries, the Church added more mysteries and prayers to the *Corona*, which gave great impetus to the practice of praying the Rosary.

This account of the *corona* shows us the path to grow deeper in our faith, even though current health measures to combat the coronavirus prevent us from gathering for Mass.

On Sunday, March 15, 2020, I made an announcement that broke my heart, suspending public Mass until further notice. An earlier dispensation from Sunday Mass was not enough to protect us and our neighbors from this deadly disease. People can be infected with the virus and transmit it to others before they begin to feel sick. And some cannot bring themselves to stay home from Mass when they are sick.

As painful as it is to be deprived of the Mass, we are followers of the Great Physician who would never want us to risk making others seriously ill. Our Catholic faith is more than what we believe; it’s how we put our belief into action with our words, deeds and interactions for the glory of God and out of Christ-like service to each other. This is a time when we are called to love God and our neighbor, drawing closer to Jesus, doing all that we can to ease the hardships of those around us.

While difficult to see, the hand of God really is present in this pandemic occurring during Lent, a season of sacrifice when we are called to spend more time in prayer, reflecting on Scripture and growing in devotion. As the coronavirus restricts our activities and human interactions, it creates an opening for a deeper relationship not only with our families and friends, acquaintances and strangers, but especially with our Lord.

As long as conditions allow, I have asked our priests to keep our Church buildings open so that you may stop in on your way to or from the supermarket, pharmacy or bank. Perhaps you have seen the image of our Holy Father, Pope Francis, during this crisis in Rome walking down a nearly deserted street to pray at a shrine where people prayed in 1522 to end the Great Plague.

I have encouraged our priests to keep churches open, so that people can visit in their own time to pray before the Blessed Sacrament and our Blessed Mother. I have also encouraged our priests to set aside times for Eucharistic Adoration, perhaps even daily. And while our priests will continue to celebrate Masses without the public, we can still receive the presence of Christ daily in spiritual communion.

When I was a youngster, I was taught about spiritual communion, meant to be prayed at times when it was impossible to receive the Eucharist. Let me share the prayer that I learned from Sister Joella, my third grade teacher who prepared my classmates and me to receive First Holy Communion. Sister told us that there might be days when we couldn't receive the Eucharist but there would never be a day when we couldn't receive Jesus in our hearts.

*My Jesus,
I believe that You
are present in the Most Holy Sacrament.
I love You above all things,
and I desire to receive You into my soul.
Since I cannot at this moment
receive You sacramentally,
come at least spiritually into my heart.
I embrace You as You are already there;*

I unite myself wholly to You.

Never permit me to be separated from You.

Amen.

Perhaps you can learn the practical lesson and beautiful prayer that Sister Joella taught my classmates and me so many years ago.

This practice of a “Spiritual Communion” became very popular during the time of the Spanish Influenza of 1918-1919. It is used for those who are unable to participate in Mass for any reason. It is used by those with unconfessed sin, by those living in countries where Mass is forbidden and during pandemics, such as COVID-19.

Not being able to go to Mass or receive Communion makes us more deeply aware of how much we need the Mass. It is there that we most intimately receive His mercy and strength as powerfully as His first Apostles did at the Last Supper. As we become aware of what is missing in our spiritual life—whether that is the Mass or the peace that should come through a relationship with Jesus—the Holy Spirit is nudging us, is speaking to our hearts with an invitation to become closer friends with Jesus, to draw on His love and share it with others.

Not being able to go to Mass can help us reflect that there are people in countries or prisoners in jails who cannot go to Mass and receive Communion as they might wish. Our inability at this time to do the same can help us empathize with them. And as we do so, we can offer up our own loss as a sacrifice. It is interesting to remember that the word “sacrifice” comes from the two Latin words “sacrum facere” which means to make holy.

Eucharistic Adoration is another alternative that we can turn to. If it is not possible to go to a church, the coronavirus page of our diocesan website has virtual adoration at www.diopitt.org/spiritual-resources.

Since the name of the coronavirus is a call to pray the Rosary, the *Corona*, I urge you to pray the Rosary daily as an individual or as a family. As you pray the Rosary, pray for wise leadership to contain the pandemic, for miraculous healing, for all who have suffered, for healthcare workers and for the strength and wisdom to respond as Jesus wants you and me to respond.

Our diocesan website also has prayers and devotions to strengthen you spiritually—including Masses streamed from Saint Paul Cathedral and Divine Mercy Parish and from Saint Paul Seminary, where I live. You will find them on our web page for response to the coronavirus: www.diopitt.org/spiritual-resources.

Also, if I may, here are some additional possible suggestions:

- Form an online prayer group with your friends.
- Join in a virtual novena to Saint Roch, also known as Saint Rocco, the protector against contagious diseases, who cared for plague victims in Rome.
- Pray to Saint Michael the Archangel to protect us from the snares of the devil at a time when many will be tempted to turn from God.
- Pray to Saint Joseph for those whose families and jobs have been disrupted.
- Pray to the Holy Family who can help families to draw closer to each other during this exceptional moment.
- Pray for those who are sick, those who are homebound, parents struggling to provide childcare when schools have closed, people whose businesses are in trouble due to lack of patrons or supplies.

It is as important that we ask ourselves important questions:

- What can we do to serve those who are forgotten?
- Can you check on neighbors?
- Do the elderly need access to technology that will allow them to watch the Mass online?
- Is there anyone in need of groceries, supplies or food?
- Can we make it a priority to place calls to those who are quarantined?

This is also a crucial time for young adult Catholics to step up and become involved in ministries of caring. Much of the person-to-person charity and visitation in our parishes is done by our senior faithful who are at high risk from this virus. I urge all young Catholics to pray about whether God may be calling you into these crucial lay ministries. I find our young Catholics to be a genuine inspiration—ever so eager to be bold disciples of Jesus in worship and in faith-filled outreach to others.

Finally, please make note. I have called for two special days of observance in our diocese.

On Tuesday, March 24, 2020, I am inviting you to join with me for a Day of Fasting for protection against the coronavirus and for all who are suffering in its wake.

On Wednesday, March 25, 2020, the Feast of the Annunciation, I am hoping that you can join in a special Day of Prayer. We have developed a number of suggestions and resources for that day which you can find listed on our diocesan web page. I chose this particular day because it is on that day that we remember the Archangel Gabriel's revelation to the Virgin Mary that she would be the mother of Jesus. That announcement brought great disruption, hardship and fear into the life of Mary—and Joseph too. Yet they responded with a faith that led to our salvation. Being able to identify with their disruption, hardship and fear, my hope is that we can all imitate their response with faith too!

I offer all of these suggestions to you, my faithful sisters and brothers of the Church of Pittsburgh, as an opportunity to think, pray and act on “The Other Side of Corona.”

In our prayerful mindset, we ask God to move us to care for those who are suffering. In so doing, we will truly find the *corona*, the crown of Mary.

In closing, permit me to share with you our National Prayer for the Church in the United States. I encourage you to join with me in praying this prayer every day through the intercession of our dear Blessed Lady:

Holy Virgin of Guadalupe,

Queen of the Angels and Mother of the Americas.

We fly to you today as your beloved children.

We ask you to intercede for us with your Son, as you did at the wedding in Cana.

Pray for us, loving Mother,

and gain for our nation and world,

and for all our families and loved ones,

the protection of your holy angels,

that we may be spared the worst of this illness.

For those already afflicted,

we ask you to obtain the grace of healing and deliverance.

Hear the cries of those who are vulnerable and fearful,

wipe away their tears and help them to trust.

In this time of trial and testing,

teach all of us in the Church to love one another and to be patient and kind.

Help us to bring the peace of Jesus to our land and to our hearts.

We come to you with confidence,

knowing that you truly are our compassionate mother,

health of the sick and cause of our joy.

Shelter us under the mantle of your protection,

keep us in the embrace of your arms,

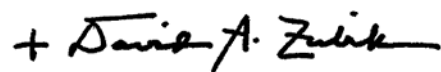
help us always to know the love of your Son, Jesus. Amen.

Please know that my wonderful staff, the outstanding priests and deacons of our diocese and myself are doing everything we can do to help you come closer to Jesus and through Mary in these times of challenge.

Please pray for them; please pray for me.

Grateful for our continued efforts together in being *On Mission for The Church Alive!*, and for our belief that “Nothing is Impossible with God,” I am

Your brother in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "+ David A. Zubik". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Most Reverend David A. Zubik
Bishop of Pittsburgh