

# *Epidemic Thoughts*

Emergencies create long stretches of unplanned time. These sudden “blank spaces” in our calendars serve God by shaking our foundations and allowing unsettling questions to arise within our hearts and souls. We dare not push these questions aside. After all, we may never again have an opportunity for prayerful reflection.

Now that the standard priestly routine has collapsed, I’ve had lots of time to mull over the “big questions.” The first is this: What really matters to the Lord?

On the Third Sunday of Lent, we read the Gospel of the Samaritan Woman. I’ve read this many times, picked through commentaries and dictionaries, and seen it from many angles. This year I saw it in a completely different light. I noticed how the Lord completely passed over three seemingly crucial ancient issues: the hatred between the Jewish and Samaritan people; the endless disputes about where and how to worship God; and the woman’s disordered moral life. The concerns of human beings, in this case the Samaritan woman’s, are not necessarily the Lord’s concerns.

Many times I fear that our concerns are not His at all. Whereas we fear “other” people, even those who share our own Catholic Faith, the Lord craves reconciliation and unity among all humanity. Whereas some engage in the hobby of “right worship,” liturgical styles, and meticulous inspection of every Mass, the Lord expresses his deepest desire: *“True worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth: that is the kind of worshipper the Father seeks. God is spirit and those who worship must worship in spirit and truth”* (John 4:23-24). This final point struck me powerfully as I celebrated a “private Mass” sacristy. On March 18, for the first time ever, the Body and Blood of Christ was raised up from a wooden table while the beautiful marble altars of our Church remained empty. Did the place of the Sacrifice make any real difference? At least for me, the epidemic which pushed me out of the sanctuary, caused me to marvel at the Glory of the Lord.

What really matters to the Lord? With time on my hands I poked around some books and came across a passage from a sermon by Fr. Christian Chesel, one of seven Trappist monks martyred in Algeria in 1997. His words seemed to unlock the mystery of the present moment:

*Accepting our powerlessness and our extreme poverty is an invitation, an urgent appeal to create with others relationships not based on power. Recognizing my weaknesses, I accept those of others. I can bear them, make them mine in imitation of Christ.*

*Such an attitude transforms us for our mission. Weakness in itself is not a virtue, but the expression of a fundamental reality which must constantly be refashioned by faith, hope and love.*

*The apostles’ weakness is like Christ’s, rooted in the mystery of Easter and the strength of the spirit. It is neither passivity nor resignation. It requires great courage and incites one to defend justice and truth and to denounce the temptation of force and power.*

What really matters to the Lord? Almost every night I have done the Stations of the Cross alone in the church. Of course, as a priest I have led them many times, but it’s very different to pray them alone at night. With Fr. Christian’s words in mind, I suddenly noticed that *every*

station brutally depicts the Lord's *humiliating weakness* rather than His power. Yet so often we seek power as the *best and only way* to advance God's cause. Rather than embracing *weakness* we tend to imitate the World rather than the Word. This epidemic demonstrates the limits of power and the astonishing fragility of our entire economic system which seemed invincible even a month ago.

The second question has to do with restoring the "normal routine." Catholics in most of America, including here, enjoy a high degree of regularity, convenience, and a wide range of choice. We tend to think that it's "*always been that way*" and will always remain so. For most of us, the almost universal suspension of Mass seems unthinkable. Yet our current situation simply replicates the *permanent emergency* endured by millions of Catholics throughout the world, especially in Africa and Latin America. There are about 70 million Catholics in the United States, just 5.8% of the total. *We are abnormal, not normal.* God is now giving us an unwelcome "taste" of "normal" Catholicism.

This should cause us to think prayerfully about our privileged position within the Church and prepare us to become more normal. Providentially, Pope Francis recently concluded the Synod that examined the Church's situation in the vast region called Amazonia. Who ever heard of Amazonia? Almost none of us. Yet millions of Catholics live there and Pope Francis raised them into visibility through the Synod. Perhaps our experience of losing easy access to the sacraments will help us to understand the Holy Father's deep concern for our brothers and sisters on the "periphery."

Through the current ordeal, many people have offered their prayers, gratitude, and support as we have tried to navigate through confusion. I am deeply grateful. At the same I have been puzzled by a few people who expected me to continue our standard routine in contradiction of Bishop Libasci's directives. This direct appeal to a pastor without consideration of the Bishop's authority flows from an unhealthy misunderstanding of Church authority. The Sacrament of Holy Orders is *plural*. There is one sacrament with three Orders — Bishops, Priests, Deacons. Each is entwined with the other two and all stand together. Harm done to one is done to all, from the lowliest deacon to the Holy Father.

Thank you for your faithfulness and good cheer in difficult times. And I especially thank our staff members and volunteers who have sacrificed so much in the service of the Lord's people at this time.

Please read and embrace the beautiful words of Miguel de Cervantes, the great Catholic novelist of Spain. He brilliantly expresses our Christian hope.

*All these squalls to which we have been subjected are signs that the weather will soon improve and things will go well with us, because it is not possible for the bad or the good to endure forever, and from this it follows that since the bad has lasted so long, the good is close at hand.*

*Fr. Michael Kerper*

