

Coronavirus and the Church: 'Submission' or 'lack of faith'?

A French bishop calls on Catholics not to pit civil law against divine law, says being careless in dealing with COVID-19 is tantamount to 'tempting God'

Bishop Raymond Centène has scolded Catholics who are questioning the validity of his recent decision to ban all public Masses in the Diocese of Vannes in northwest France in an effort to stop the spread of the coronavirus.

The 62-year-bishop, who has led the diocese in Brittany the past fourteen years, took issue with those who are creating an artificial confrontation between the Church's commandments and the civil laws.

"Obedience to civil laws that is not a concession made out of weakness; it is a Christian's duty," Bishop Centène said.

The Diocese of Vannes is located in the department of Morbihan, one of the three French territories hardest hit by COVID-19.

'Viruses are not destroyed when we enter a church'

The bishop said obeying civil authorities is in no way opposed to St Peter's declaration before the Sanhedrin that "obedience to God comes before obedience to humans" (Acts 5, 29).

"It is necessary to distinguish between conscientious objection that could compromise God's plan" and obedience to "laws aimed at safeguarding public health," he said.

Bishop Centène also warned Catholics not to make dubious analogies, such as evoking the resistance of the martyrs in times of trial.

"Their witness was at the cost of their own lives and not at the risk of the health and life of their neighbor," he pointed out.

He urged believers to follow the advice of St. Ignatius of Loyola: "Act as if everything depended on you; trust as if everything depended on God."

The temptation of 'fideism'

The bishop said the virtues of "charity" and "prudence" must guide our actions and decisions during the coronavirus pandemic, especially on the question of offering Mass and access to the Eucharist.

He said the Blessed Sacrament is never "a right" that a person of faith can claim "in defiance of charity."

"We cannot ask God to perform a one-off miracle to make up for our lack of prudence," Bishop Centène said.

"Viruses are no more destroyed by going into a Catholic church than they are by going into a Protestant one," he said, rejecting such an attitude as a form of providentialism.

The bishop also pointed out that the consecrated host "remains subject to the laws of nature" and can be contaminated with the virus.

He said he was most concerned about the lack of prudence some Catholics are demonstrating during the pandemic. He likened it to "tempting God."

As an example he cited the Gospel passage from the First Sunday of Lent, which recounts the temptations Jesus faced in the desert.

The devil tells Jesus to throw himself down from the top of the temple and that God will send his angels "lest you dash your foot against a stone". Jesus replies: "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test."

"Praying for health without taking any precautions to prevent the spread of a disease is not faith, it is fideism," the bishop said.

Addressing those Catholics who are worried about not being able to go to Mass, he noted that the Sunday obligation is a matter of Church law.

He said Church authorities can temporarily dispense with this obligation in times of difficulty or when it is impossible for the faithful to attend Mass.