

**A PASTOR'S REFLECTIONS  
ON THE  
CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC**

**by**

**Fr. Norman A. Ermis, Pastor  
St. Peter the Apostle Catholic Parish  
Boerne, Texas  
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**Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord**

Learning last night about the 40 year old employee of St. Luke's Catholic Church in San Antonio dying from the COVID-19 after their pastor and staff had been placed on self-quarantine makes this pandemic and its consequences 'hit home' and be more real and profound for me. Our condolences and prayers go out to her family, friends and the St. Luke's staff and parishioners. This news was the tipping point of my decision to share some reflections with you, my parishioners.

A pressing question for me, as pastor, is how each person and family is dealing with the crisis and disruption unleashed by the whole COVID-19 invasion, social distancing, societal lockdown, economic meltdown and the ensuing anxiety, uncertainty, fear, and sense of adversity we face. This is a surreal experience and very disorienting. At times it feels as if we are on the precipice of panic, social unrest, and chaos. It is true to say that we have never been through anything exactly like this before. We have entered uncharted territory. How we maneuver through this as a global community, and specifically as the United States of America and the Roman Catholic Church, will be written about in history and medical books for future generations to read and learn from.

All of this impacts our mindset, attitude, emotional state, perspective, spiritual life and our families. We are especially conscious of our physical distance from one another, the ways of life we miss, and all the social connections and meaningful pursuits that are absent now. Please be positive and hope-filled as you strive to maintain a healthy Christian faith and perspective, ever mindful of our yearning to return to the normal patterns of our social engagement, full parish life, ministries, outreach, services, evangelization and worship experiences.

For some in the community insecurity, fear, anxiety and even panic are daily experiences given the COVID-19 pandemic. It is unnerving to see grocery store shelves of food and household supplies be emptied quickly due to hoarding and to hear of the rapid increase of purchases of guns and ammunition in preparation to defend oneself, one's family and property. Other examples could be cited as well. I entreat you to not let distrust, panic or fear of the situation and one another overcome you.

Our tradition and church leadership invite us to draw from the deep well within us of the greatest Christian characteristics, qualities, and virtues that transform us as we practice them in this very challenging time: Love, service, community, self-giving, self-sacrifice, suffering and giving without expecting a return. Let us have a deepened sense of gratitude for the rights and freedoms we have in our country and Church: Of free speech/expression, of assembly; of religious belief, practice and worship; and the freedom to move freely in society and the world, and the freedom to work for the common good. In this most challenging of times we must put into practice what we proclaim and

preach in periods of normalcy, calm and tranquility. This is where the “pedal hits the metal,” as the old saying goes. This is where we put words into action in a hard-won and authentic way.

We might rightfully ask ourselves: How do we not let this COVID-19 invasion chip away at our faith, dampen our spirit and resolve? How can we remain fully engaged and work proactively until this nightmare is over?

Some are even asking: “Where is God in all of this?” “Why does God allow such horrible things to happen worldwide doing so much harm to human life and the economy?” These questions lead me to a personal reflection on the Biblical story in 1 Kings 19:9-18. The Prophet Elijah is taking shelter in the cave and the word of the Lord asks, “Why are you here, Elijah?” A promise was voiced that the Lord would be passing by outside the cave. Elijah waited. A strong and heavy wind came. Then an earthquake. Then fire. The Lord was not present in any of them. After the fire there was a tiny whispering sound. When Elijah heard it he hid his face in his cloak knowing the Lord was present. A critical lesson is that God is in the unexpected. We can ask: “How is God manifest in some direct or indirect way in our response individually as Christians, as church communities, as a nation and as a global village to this COVID-19 pandemic? God can be and is present in some dimensions of all experiences of human life.

One of the enduring lessons we have from the Sacred Scriptures is the human experience of facing adversity. Elijah faced adversity leading to his cave experience and the presence of the Lord. Think of other examples such as the Israelite exodus from slavery; nations in war against other nations; plagues, famines and droughts; authentic prophets being ridiculed and attacked, religious persecutions; temptation and sin; sickness and demon possessions; Jesus facing passion, suffering, the Cross and death. These are just a few experiences of human adversity addressed in the Scriptures. **The enduring lesson drawn from the Bible is that God is always accompanying us---he is always on the journey as treacherous and onerous as it might be. Whether on the exodus and sojourn through the desert or in our present experiences, we know God has never abandoned or orphaned us. He is always with us at any time in human history and in every country and culture of the world and in every experience of life. We renew ourselves in this truth that God is with us now.** In more recent history we know God has been with us through 9/11, the Clergy Sexual Abuse Scandal, Hurricane Harvey, the stock market meltdown of 2008 and now in this COVID-19 pandemic and economic downturn as well.

**As your pastor I say it to you again: God has not abandoned us. God is with us! This is our confidence, our truth and our hope!** God is still God even in the chaos and uncertainty of the moment. We are still his Sons and Daughters, co-heirs with Jesus, His Son, to the Kingdom of Heaven. God is Creator of this magnificent, mysterious universe, our home, the planet Earth, and His crowning gift of creation, humanity itself in its biological complexity, which is the breeding ground of the COVID-19 invasion. In a real sense, our present experience is a trip into the deep mystery of our existence, its meaning, purpose, and ultimate goal. Most prominently in all of this, we are each invited into a deeper personal relationship with Jesus Christ and with one another on our mutual journey through this life. Jesus took on flesh to be one among us, to be like us in all things but sin. He knows our flesh and blood experience, our frailties and fears, our joys, sorrows, adversities, freedoms and confinements. He also knows our threats to health and life; he knows death and its hold on us. But Jesus is our life; he is our Redeemer and our hope. He is the Divine Physician and Healer. He takes care of our faults, limits, sins,

frailty, illnesses and disabilities. He can instruct and calm us through this pandemic with the assurances of faith and the gift of salvation.

I believe the most constructive and practical question is not “why,” but “how.” More specifically, “How will we make it through this COVID-19 attack, disruption and threat to health, human life, our nation’s security and welfare, and the economy?” Clearly we cannot make it through this individually like a “lone ranger,” but only collectively as nations of the world. We will make it through this together when all of us take a positive role and responsibility, focusing on the common good, the public and global good, for all humanity. We must act with honesty and integrity being willing to be inconvenienced, be other-oriented and service-minded, willing to sacrifice and suffer together, share personally and of our resources, and be a people of faith in solidarity.

With our nationwide experience of social distancing and the ban on worshipping in large communal gatherings, it feels as if we are being robbed and cheated of one of the most sacred things in life: Our faith community, our common prayer and worship, the Mass and Holy Communion, our ministries and services, our safety and security in this time of great adversity. There is great value in how Pope Francis has invited us as a family to embrace the beauty of “spiritual communion.” I truly believe that once we are past the worst of the deadly virus and we reflect back on our experiences, we will see our communal response in faith as a “moment of grace,” an “encounter with God,” and a deeper “encounter with one another.” Using a phrase of the Gospels, in retrospect, we will understand this experience as a profound encounter of the “love of God, neighbor and self.”

It is unique that the hierarchy of our Church, from Rome to each local diocese, has submitted to secular authorities in science, medicine, public health, the government and its agencies. The Church has humbly submitted to these authorities in the interest of the common good, the public and global good, the health and welfare of the world and civilization. The Church has gone so far in its cooperation and collaboration that it has granted every Catholic a dispensation from the requirement of participating in the Mass on Sunday. We are assured that in this extreme situation we are not bound by mortal sin by not attending Mass. However, we have the opportunity through modern social media to participate in the Mass through live-streaming from the parish into our homes and should avail of the offering and experience the “communion of desire.”

A minority of people believe the hierarchy of the Church has acquiesced to secular authority, leaving the faithful ‘out in the cold’ to fend for themselves without Mass, Holy Communion and the other sacraments. My interpretation is that the hierarchy of the Church has been incredibly wise, practical, prudent and humble in its decision. We have been challenged like very few times in history to understand “church” in a deeper way than ever, as the “community of the faithful,” sharing in the most basic experiences of life, and connecting in ways that confound every life possibility, including this virus. We have been forced in very practical ways to expand our notion, understanding, experience and outreach of the “church.” We see more clearly than before that church is not primarily bricks and mortar, buildings and complexes, but people and communities gathered in whatever means possible sharing faith and supporting one another in prayer and worship. Our modern world and its ever evolving social and media technologies allow us to be communities of faith in so many new and profound ways.

To fully sense the importance of the Church’s cooperation with civil experts in this pandemic, we might ask rhetorically: What if the hierarchy had invited secular professionals to share their knowledge and wisdom, and cooperated with and trusted more experts like scientists, psychologists, sociologists,

criminal profilers and civil law and the judicial system in addressing the clergy sexual abuse issue? We would most likely be at a very different place than we are today with this incredibly devastating issue in our Church, damaging the abused for a lifetime and blemishing the Church's integrity and holiness in ways beyond imagination.

With all I have said thus far and will continue to say, a major point is that with the invasion of this virus, its disruption, the ensuing chaos, and manifold ramifications, there are hidden blessings within it all. I try to see the positive in every human experience, no matter how challenging, difficult and threatening it may be. We only need to open our minds and eyes, not to be blind spiritually, and act on the divine opportunities provided to navigate this dire human adversity. This experience causes us to think differently, to reflect more deeply and see how to maneuver through this together in a multidimensional way. With social distancing and civic restrictions, most of us have been able to slow down a bit from the fast pace of life, grow closer to one another, enter new routines, see life through a different perspective and prism, and focus on what is most important in life: The gift of life itself, family, relationships, community, civic duty and responsibility, church, faith and prayer. We are also learning that being deprived of our desire for constant physical connectivity, and even sacrificing and suffering together, is not necessarily a bad thing, but can be good and beneficial for spiritual growth.

Please think about this for a moment: Our human bodies are biological marvels. God created them as such. We are flesh and bones, genes, molecules, viruses, bacteria, etc., all held in equilibrium and check until a new germ or virus, like this COVID-19, is mutated and invades with no remedy or vaccine presently known. What becomes crystal clear is that we all need a very healthy and active immune system to survive and thrive. Speaking metaphorically, we also need a healthy and very active spiritual immune system that can defend against the invasion of temptation, rebellion against God, sin, vices and evil in our lives. This healthy and active spiritual immune system would include all of the following: good use of reason and wise decision-making; a sense of self as both sinner and saint; a deep and mature personal relationship with God, our Creator and Father, and his Son, Jesus Christ; a strong prayer life; a well-developed conscience; a strong moral compass; the spiritual depth and maturity to resist sin and temptation; a desire to serve others with humility; readiness to be a disciple and profess faith as witness to others. Just as we physically need each other's germs, viruses and bacteria to build immunity with one another, so do we need spiritual immunity to be with and for one another promoting life to the fullest. Our experience with COVID-19 reminds us of these critical lessons of Christian life. We are renewed in our common bonds, frailty, vulnerability, mortality and interdependence to sustain life. In all that, we are more human and humble, and full of the potential for holiness.

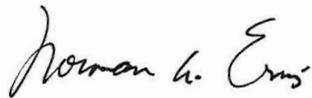
From a practical and liturgical dimension, I recommend that each of us contextualize our present experience with COVID-19 in an expanded Lenten penitential perspective. Let us use this time penitentially and as a cause of authentic conversion and change in life. Whatever we have given up or deprived ourselves of for this Lenten season has most likely been trumped by our social distancing, shelter-in-place restrictions, and fears for our jobs, safety, security and overall welfare. We are at a moment of uncertainty and unknowing. What a position of vulnerability to truly open ourselves to the Lord more deeply in faith and trust. As we progress toward Easter Sunday, let us be renewed in its message of liberation, Resurrection and new life.

Recognize the holiness and sacredness of your family and home like never before. Let them be authentic experiences of the "domestic church." Make your homes and families spiritual environments where, as parents, you share mutually and collaboratively as spiritual leaders and mentors. Make your families and homes a spiritual refuge, a place of reflection and prayer, a shelter from the world but in

the world, to share love, mercy, compassion and forgiveness. Read the Bible together, pray together, love one another, bless one another, and go out into the world daily spiritually ready to face life's many opportunities and challenges.

I share these reflections on the Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord. This solemnity is the celebration of Jesus' conception within the Virgin Mary, accomplished by the power of the Holy Spirit. This solemnity reminds us in a profound way of the promise of the Messiah's coming and making his dwelling with us. We celebrate this solemnity on March 25<sup>th</sup>, nine months before our celebration of his birth on December 25<sup>th</sup>. Mary rejoices in her role as God-bearer, Mother of the Savior. In the Angel Gabriel's greeting of "Hail full of grace, the Lord is with you" we see that God was with Mary as was His grace and strength in a most personal, unique and powerful way. We are also, as Mary, assured of God's presence, grace, strength and power in all we face in this life. Let us submit to His will with an enduring "yes."

Thank you for your time and attention. If these reflections provide an ounce of reassurance and blessing for you, then my goal in writing them has been accomplished. God's enduring peace be with you and your families!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Norman G. Erms". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'N' and 'E'.