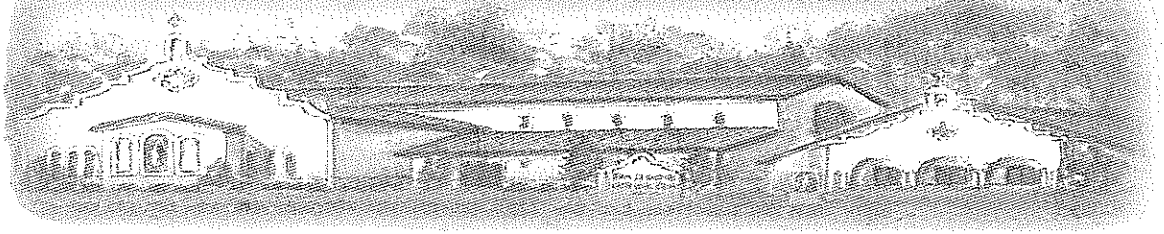


SAN SEBASTIAN CATHOLIC CHURCH



March 21-22, 2020

Dear Parishioners,

What an unusual time we live in! Who would have thought, back in November when the new liturgical year began, that our Lenten sacrifice would be “giving up the mass” and “fasting from the Eucharist”? And who knows how long we will be improvising, or whether things will ever go back to the way they were?

Yet our future journey in faith, while unknown, is not insecure. We are pledged by our baptism to follow the Lord wherever He leads (I am not the decider – Thy will be done). We are sealed by the Spirit in confirmation against all permanent danger (come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful). We know we are being saved by Eucharistic incorporation in Christ (I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me). We want to know our tomorrow, but shall not; we need to know only today (sufficient to the day are the problems thereof; let tomorrow take care of itself).

San Sebastian parish will surely survive and ultimately thrive because we are rooted in our faith, part of the larger community of St. Johns County, of Florida, of the USA, and the Earth. Together we all face the same challenge of a pandemic forcing us to recognize and embrace the fact that we inhabit and share one planet. We breathe the one atmosphere and divide up the fruits of one biosphere.

Civil society is requiring of us more cleansing, less clustering; greater spiritual solidarity but less physical contact. Let us cooperate energetically for the duration, in creative communication and generous sharing, protecting each other for the common good. We and our forebears have done this before, in war and in peace, bearing sacrifices, healing wounds, deepening character, staying the course.

Our Church reminds us we are already on pilgrimage through the desert of Lent, prepared for hardships and strong in our fellowship. We seek to celebrate the Paschal Mystery at Easter, our share in Christ’s suffering, death, and rising in glory. We are actively accompanying the candidates and catechumens through RCIA, and self-consciously remembering that they are looking to our lives to see how it’s done. We are the model; we are their textbook; we are the pioneers blazing the trail here through trials thick and thin.

The bishops have wisely restricted for the moment gatherings of the faithful for worship, education, organization, and fellowship. Let us imitate their prudence. But no one is blocked from intense prayer and insatiable learning – put yourself “on retreat” with Jesus, and read, read, read! We will try to delay for awhile the celebration of sacraments that would expose us to possible contagion; but emergency and extra-ordinary circumstances will be responded to. Meantime, we keep living the sacraments, and let “our little light shine”.

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The Eucharist is being celebrated, without congregation, each day at San Sebastian, for your general needs, and for specific intentions. As your pastor I will celebrate, without congregation, a mass each Sunday pro populo, that is, for the whole of the church. The church building will be open for prayer and visits to the Blessed Sacrament seven days a week, from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm. Take your usual hygienic precautions to protect yourself and others; but don't come if you are sick.

The Church Office will be open for its usual hours: 9:00 am to 3:00 pm Monday through Friday but we encourage you to limit contact and use phone or internet, if possible. Priests can be contacted through the usual channels. Check our website and Facebook for updates and messages. Bishop Estévez has lifted the obligation of abstinence for the rest of Lent: you may eat meat on Fridays. But seek to substitute some other appropriate sacrifice or good deed.

If you seek any guidance in your prayer and reading this week, I recommend from the Old Testament the three books of Ruth, Tobit, and Jonah (short, sweet, to the point); from the New Testament, the Letter to the Hebrews (an elegant appeal for endurance in hard times); and from Pope Francis, the incomparable and prescient Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home (an encyclical challenging us to figure out better how to inhabit our planet).

There are many creative models we can incorporate in our personal and collective consciousness to help us through the current difficulties: hurricane party; camping trip; pilgrimage; walk about; identity quest; snowed-in; monastic novitiate; basic training. Each of these may trigger suggestive responses for you. But I remind you historically that the roots of our faith practice in Judaism have been strongly linked to the food and eating practices (kosher) of the family at home, and in Christianity to the domestic church gathered at the table for food and eucharist. For three hundred years at risk of persecution we survived and thrived around our family meals. Make every effort to gather your family who are not quarantined, around your table: pray, read Scripture, eat, drink, sing, joke, tell the family stories, and celebrate being the building-block of God's holy people.

Per aspera ad astra (through hard times to the stars)

Peace,

John D. Gillespie
Pastor