

EMBRACING THE REALITY OF THE NEW NORMAL

While we are all in this together, it is important to embrace the reality that is being placed before us. My life changed recently. A cleaning company to which we outsource the cleaning of the rectory informed us that one of the workers that came to the rectory in late April tested positive for the virus a few days after she was in the house. While I made the decision to let in the cleaning crew, I had cancelled them a few times in the past weeks. This time I had convinced myself it would be safe. While my contact was minimal with the team, I opened the door to them and showed them what needed to be done. They had on masks and I left quickly, but the potential was there. I had come in contact with the virus and a person cleaning the house was there for an hour and a half. I am grateful that the company contacted us. After receiving the information the Kendall County Health Department was contacted. I was told that I would need to stay in self-quarantine for 14 days from the contact. Even up until the time I received this news, I have been taking everything seriously. I wear a mask in every building, I clean my hands, wear gloves, wipe things down with Clorox wipes. I have been vigilant. I wipe down my glasses after every trip out, put my clothes in the washing machine after every trip outside. Yet this news still changed everything.

My first thought was to pray for this worker who now is sick, her family and the feelings she may have of knowing she might have infected others. My second thought was about my own guilt. Have I gotten someone else sick? Have I unknowingly passed on the virus? The health department was clear about quarantine, checking for symptoms and directed me to get tested if I experience any symptoms. That just brought forth the anxiety march. I had to think of the new stress to my corneal transplants. I began taking my temperature every two hours. I began to realize this quarantine just changed for me. It was one thing for me to make the decision to be responsible, but now it was taken from me. No more movement outside of the house, no more walks to the river, no more contact with the outside world. When it is imposed, not chosen, it begins at a different place. While I wholeheartedly agree with it, my mind began to close down. I became hyper vigilant to check to see if I could still smell. I began to overanalyze every movement, every ache or pain I might have. It became a mind game that was hard to shut off at first. I was glad that by the time they informed me and the health department responded, already I was well into the 14 days of restrictions. The more time passed, the worse I knew it was going to get. I have not at the time of this writing, shown any symptoms (I am in day 9). I am grateful to God for this. I realize that at any moment any of us might be asked to do the same just because we have come in contact with a person confirmed with the virus. It did not matter to the health department that all of us were wearing masks, that there was no physical contact, that the interchange was less than ten minutes and at a safe distance. I opened the door and I opened up myself to potential danger.

I realize there are a lot of emotions and needs for confirmation of do I have it or do I not have it? The emotions are real. So what have I done so far? I have had to realize I have no control over the situation. I have had to accept responsibility for allowing the person into the rectory. It was a poor choice on my part. Yet, what we must be prepared for is that what I am having to do, we might have to do in our facility whenever someone with the virus tests positive at this point. Whether it is a staff member, maintenance worker, special outsource workers, like carpenters, plumbers and electricians, if any contact was made, we will need to close. Members will need to self-quarantine. I can't begin to fathom about daily and Sunday Mass. Yet I am not afraid of this new reality. Living it, I know that if I am to contract the virus, then it is mine to experience. If I am spared, I am lucky and need to learn from it. Secondly, I realize that I can't control the spread of it, who has it and who might bring it to us. They are not to be condemned, looked down upon or singled out. This is a time for understanding, not guilt. Third, my trust in God is not in asking to be spared, even though I am afraid of not knowing how I will handle it. Rather I trust that I will not be abandoned with whatever the outcome, even if I am to die from it or if my sight is impaired because of it. This is not a curse from God to rid the world of evil people. That is horrible theology and should never been considered. My biggest fear is in passing sickness to others. My heart sunk when the news was given to me. My stomach wrenched with the recalling of places I have been and people I have talked to even though I follow protocol. After a few days I started to embrace every hour on the hour and time passing slower and slower, looking for milestones. Each day, I have worked on remaining grateful to God, each day I have celebrated Eucharist in the chapel of the rectory. I have cleaned the rectory like it has never been cleaned before and that brought me peace as well. My quality time with God has become a wrestling match, begging for time to pass more quickly. I pray for strength to wait for answers. And I pray that soon I will be able to venture out to my hour long walks through the neighborhood and by the river.

This has been difficult, but each new day has been another day away from the initial contact. Each new day is a day I never experienced before and need to fill with fresh ideas for a yet better next day. Watching others doing things I want to do just allows my hunger to do them to intensify, knowing that when the time comes, when I can finally do them, I will cherish them even more. God has been about many things in my life during this lockdown, but most of all His love. If and when any of you have to go through this, it is my hope and prayer that you will know God will not abandon you, but He will walk with you. That has been the greatest truth in all of this.



Father John

"I WILL NOT LEAVE YOU ORPHANS"
Celebrating 36 Years of Priesthood

In today's Gospel Jesus is preparing His followers. He tells them of the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, a spirit of truth who He will give them. All of this is a message to their hearts that soon the Ascension would happen and their life would be changed forever. At the Ascension they would be sent out to baptize the world, to spread the Good News of forgiveness and new life. It was a powerful time of expectation and anticipation as they waited for the Holy Spirit.

As I experience my Anniversary of Ordination on the 18th of May, I do so with great hope and with great anticipation. Soon we will reopen the doors of the church for in-person celebrations of the Sacraments. We will welcome in a safe and restricted way those who are able to return. My heart looks so forward to that time; it is a deep longing for me. These words of the Lord speak to me this year more than they ever have. He will not leave us orphans or abandoned. Heroic stories become the backdrop of my anniversary this year. Incredible pain has been thrust on our earth, yet healing has found a way. Uncertainty has reached epic proportions, yet faith is still alive. We continue to forge new ways and what the new normal will be continues to be a consistent part of conversations. What I have known since the day of my ordination still rings true; my life has a purpose and a meaning most profoundly when I am living it for others as a sacrifice for them. This is the core of all vocations, parenting, single life, holy life. Being a child of God it is not exclusive to just priests. From the washing of feet to the Breaking of Bread; from the feeding of the multitude to the whisper that your sins are forgiven, the plan has been played out for all of us. This year in the quiet of a chapel at dawn I will celebrate Eucharist because it is my greatest joy. This Lord will remind me I am not orphaned, nor will I ever be. To me there is no greater joy than this: to know we are not alone. I rely on this strength. I believe in these words and the promise of what they mean. It has been a year like no other. Because it is like no other, it is a time we can cherish and never let go of what it is to teach us.

I thank you for your love and support. I thank you for your commitment to the faith. It inspires and humbles me. I thank you for your trust in who we are as a parish. God is about glorious things in us. Just as He prepared His disciples for the new normal by telling them of the Holy Spirit, so He tells all of us that we are not orphans. The Spirit of truth will walk with us and we are to journey forward, bringing the Good News to all the ends of the earth. As for me, I will cherish this invitation, this time of anticipation and expectation.

As the journey continues, may it find us in prayer for one another.



Father John J. Ouper