

March 13, 2020

Dear Friends,

It seems that we live in interesting times, and at least for a moment, humanity has a common and unseen enemy that we must all stand together against. If there can be a good thing that comes from the Coronavirus, it could be that it has the potential to unite a people who have become so bitterly divided in recent years, not just internationally, but even within our own communities. The Coronavirus that wreaked havoc in Asia and Europe is now on our shores. Indications are, from the government contacts that some of us have, that our government is publicly hoping for the best while quietly preparing for the worst. When voices of authority speak up, our policies will likely have to be amended. We are just learning more and more about the Coronavirus every day, not all of it accurate, and every day the situation changes.

It is important that our parish not spread panic nor try to second guess medical experts, while at the same time we don't want to fail to respond to what is clearly becoming a crisis. Whatever response we make, even if it is overly cautious, will be out of love for our parishioners and out of a desire to be responsible to those in our spiritual care.

Some of our responses to this crisis are dictated to us. Local nursing homes, for example, have curtailed unnecessary visits for the foreseeable future, as their residents are among the most vulnerable to the Coronavirus. Many in our parish are elderly, and some are homebound. It would be prudent for Communion visits to the elderly to cease for the time being, and we encourage our elderly parishioners to stay home, so as to limit possible exposure to the virus. We want everyone to stay healthy.

As a parish we have already taken the advice of the archdiocese about reception from the cup and the sign of peace. There are those who may want to avoid the holy water fonts too. Our pastor will not automatically extend his hand to shake after Mass, as he does not want to unwittingly become a source of common contamination to us all. Experts tell us we'll need to get better at social distancing, and to learn to use our smiles more to connect without unnecessarily touching one another.

Starting on Friday morning, 20 March 2020, the parish will suspend all non-Eucharistic gatherings until further notice. This means that all our great organizations and groups will not be able to meet or gather or teach. Some of our own organizations (like the Knights of Columbus) have already been told by their superiors to suspend all gatherings and meetings. Some of our organizations like the American Heritage Girls have already suspended their meetings. There is one possible exception

that may be made with our Saint Vincent de Paul Society, providing that organization agrees that it is possible for them to continue their work in a way that does not put their members at risk. This policy will include all religious education, as well as non-parochial groups that use our facilities. It will also include our Stations of the Cross and Lenten suppers. This will become mandatory on 20 March, but we encourage our groups to cease meeting earlier if possible. This closure will be maintained for the last three weeks of Lent, and it will be reassessed as we get closer to Easter should we need to extend it.

Again, our own organizations have had many concerns about this, as so many of our organizations include many elderly folks who are more susceptible to the Coronavirus, so out of an abundance of caution for them, we will need to do more praying at home, and more work through remote contacts via email and social media. It pains us to make this call, as we know that so many people look forward to the events and ministries that surround our parish life, and others look to us for charity. Still, we need to see our social distancing itself as an act of charity. We should work together to slow down this virus so that experts can have more time to study it and to find a way to ultimately defeat it.

Masses will continue as usual, and the schedule for the Triduum should remain unaffected. Office hours will remain as they have been. Anyone wishing to come into the church for prayers will still be welcomed. We cannot predict, at present, if this is going to be a big event, or if we are overreacting, but we hope our actions are responsible and are measured. Our catechists might challenge our students and families to do more by way of distance learning, and we encourage each parishioner to keep up with what's going on at the parish through Facebook, as things can change so very quickly. Our Holy Week liturgies may seem more basic, as our choirs will not be gathering for weekly rehearsals this year. We must just see how long this will last, and then roll with the punches.

Most importantly, let us all be sensitive to those around us. If we are sick, stay home. No one can deep clean every surface in every space that we use, and we have conflicting news about how long the Coronavirus can survive on surfaces, so please everyone, wash your hands often, and learn not to touch your faces. Together we can defeat this Coronavirus, through prayer, through vigilance, and in our prudential care for ourselves and for others.

In faith,

Fr. Charles Byrd