

March 29, 2020

Dear Friends,

It is Monday afternoon March 23rd and I am at my computer in the Rectory. I am one week into a self-imposed fourteen day quarantine after returning from Israel last Sunday morning. My quarantine will last until next Sunday morning. As of this moment I feel good, and I have no ill effects that I know of from our recent sojourn in the Holy Land. I am glad that our return flight did not land in New York but rather in Newark. We arrived early in the morning and were moved through customs and through baggage claim in a most expeditious fashion. I, for one, am glad for all of that.

I have been a bit rammy just being in the Rectory pretty much for the past week. One of the blessings that I am very thankful for is to have the opportunity to celebrate the Eucharist in the Rectory Chapel and to record it on my Smart Phone and then post it to YouTube so that the recording may be accessible to any parishioner and anyone else. Feel free to share the internet connection with family members of friends.

Ironically, while I am celebrating by myself early in the morning in the small Rectory Chapel, the Mass feels anything but isolation. I have this deep sense of connection and even communion—with Our Lord, of course, but with you. It is my great honor and privilege to pray for all of you daily, throughout the day. Celebrating Mass in this way in some way binds me more closely to you and your families and loved ones. I can almost feel it in the celebration.

We are presently exploring how we might set up a Live Stream for Mass so that instead of you watching a recording of Mass you will be able to watch in real time the celebration. We would post exactly when and where these live presentations would be happening. There is something compelling about the alive-ness of such moments. Also, we may have to utilize something like Live Streaming for Holy Week because it is looking more and more likely that there will not be a typical or usual Holy Week or Easter Sunday Mass schedule this year. As I am typing this, Governor Wolf has extended for two more weeks the Commonwealth mandate to stay in our homes except for food, medicine, emergency activities. That would preclude gatherings of Catholics to worship at Holy Week and Easter Services.

If that is the case then we would do our best to Live Stream the Holy Week Services and Easter Sunday Mass. As I did this past weekend, I will celebrate Mass in the Spanish language on Easter for our Spanish speaking parishioners. None of us can see into the future. My best assessment is that we have not yet seen the worst of what is to come. Things will get worse in terms of the spread of the virus and the number of people who get really sick and who will die because of it. Our best weapon is prayer. Make a good act of contrition each night before you go to sleep. Encourage your family members and friends to do the same. It is a great burden to me not to be able to offer the sacrament of reconciliation to you at this time. Even when my quarantine is over I would like to extend the offer but am not sure how to go about setting that up and still maintaining the privacy of the confessional with the six foot safety precaution.

The Holy Father is considering giving permission for General Absolution for this time. Of course, General Absolution is a stop gap. It applies for those times when a person just cannot get to confession but needs forgiveness. The proviso is that when the emergency or crisis passes then the person receiving General Absolution will then actually go to confession and receive absolution in the usual manner. In all my 47 years as a priest I have never given general absolution. My father told me he received it once during World War II. The chaplain was hearing confessions before Mass on the base. There were still a number of sailors wanting the sacrament. The chaplain said that he was going to give them General absolution so he could begin Mass. The sailors were like “Yesss!” The chaplain then reminded them that the proviso was that they would go to confession at the first opportunity. He told them that for them the first opportunity was immediately after this Mass when he would gladly hear their confessions. Remember the Lord’s forgiveness is guaranteed in the sacrament but it is not limited to the sacrament. If you need to tell Him you are sorry and need to ask for his forgiveness then by all means do so. Don’t wait. Let this crisis get your attention about what really is important.

Peace,

Msgr. McHenry