

OPINION

The Church is a spiritual hospital. Don't take away the Mass for coronavirus

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By Phil Lawler

March 12, 2020 (CatholicCulture.org) — Let me confess in advance: if my diocese follows the example set by the Seattle archdiocese, and suspends the public celebration of Mass, I'll be looking for a priest who leaves the door unlocked when he celebrates a "private" Mass.

It's not essential that I receive Communion. If public-health concerns make that impossible, so be it. But I need to participate regularly in the holy Sacrifice; without it, life makes no sense. So if the Mass goes "underground," so will I.

Fortunately my own pastor has moved in the opposite direction. Like Archbishop Gadecki, he has decided that the coronavirus epidemic calls for scheduling *more* public Masses, so that the pews will be less crowded and the likelihood of contagion diminished. The mathematical logic of the Polish archbishop's directive is flawless:

Acknowledging the recommendation of the Chief Sanitary Inspector that there not be large gatherings of people, I'm asking for the increase — insofar as this is possible — in the number of Sunday Masses in the churches, so that at any one time the number of faithful participating in the liturgies are according to the sanitary regulation.

Yes, of course there is some risk in any public gathering. But I take a risk every time I step into a car. Sensible people take sensible precautions in the face of any danger, and during the length of this epidemic those precautions will rightly be heightened. But there is no way to eliminate all risk. We make our choices; we set our priorities.

And *especially* in dangerous times, the priority of the Catholic Church is the salvation of souls. If I do catch the coronavirus, I want it to happen while I am in a state of grace. And old friend, a soldier with an enormous amount of combat experience, told me that he and his comrades would encourage each other, on the eve of battle, to “stay ’fessed up and prayed up.” Good advice, that.

Let public health officials set guidelines for curbing the spread of the epidemic. Pastors should follow those guidelines (as long as they do not interfere with their central mission), but they have their own important role to play. Archbishop Gadecki made sense on this point, too:

In the current situation, I wish to remind you that just as hospitals treat diseases of the body, so the Church serves to, among other things, treat illness of the soul; that is why it is unimaginable that we not pray in our churches.

In Tyler, Texas, Bishop Joseph Strickland has gone a step further, seizing the offensive:

I call on every Catholic priest to lead a simple Eucharistic Procession around your Church sometime before the Feast of St Joseph, March 19, for repentance, Christ's healing hand on the Coronavirus & that all men may be Godly, manly sons & disciples of His Son Jesus Christ.

Will a Eucharistic procession halt the spread of the coronavirus? I don't know. I do know that the Lord *can* stop it, if He chooses. More to the point, it's the role of the Church to remind a confused and panicky population that the Lord is in charge—that our encounter with Him is infinitely more important than a possible encounter with a virus.

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