

Basilica of St. Michael Parish

out our diocese might be able to benefit from spiritual communion while attending 'virtual' Mass. No public Eucharistic adoration? One diocesan priest posted that he had taken the Lord Jesus out in the monstrance by himself to the four corners of his property, stopping at each corner to offer a blessing so that his parishioners in all directions were being blessed by Christ Himself.

It hasn't just been our priests, either. I read a Facebook post from a Johnstown parishioner who was part of a parish group who had volunteered to make masks for medical workers. Another lay campus minister in our diocese asked people to privately send the name of a few families that might be in need of a food donation that she had available. A Catholic health worker, certainly with other pressing concerns, messaged me to ask for ministries in Altoona that might ensure that a similar donation would go to the neediest people.

In my own home, this past Sunday was an odd one, but beautiful in its own way. My wife set up a beautiful little prayer altar in our living room using the coffee table, some nice fabric and some candles. Two of my sons did the readings, we did spontaneous petitions, then did some silent prayer while livestreaming Eucharistic adoration from YouTube. One spiritual communion and a closing hymn later, and we certainly felt that we were united with Our Lord in a special way, as a family and individually. Oddly enough, I had a great sense of being united with all Catholics as well, despite not being physically present with them. It was in no sense a substitute for an actual Mass, of course; and yet it was a wonderful experience for us, one which will make Mass all the more special when we are able to gather together once again. It was also an authentic occasion of grace.

Also this week, I received an invitation to join a relatively new Facebook group, 'Central PA Catholics.' The group had been started a few months ago by two Catholic teens who feel very intently called to evangelization in our diocese. The two teens are good friends— one from Catholic school, one from public school— who simply want to build others up in their Catholic faith. They had a few dozen in the group for the first two months of its existence, but after the past few weeks of Coronavirus quarantine, they are on their way to four hundred members, including a number of our diocesan priests. The group quickly became a platform for people to share sacramental opportunities and positive messages about the faith, for offering helpful tips and prayers for staying strong spiritually in these times, and a discussion place for creative ideas that might be used going forward in helping build sacramental grace without the kind of availability we've been used to.

All of this is beautiful evidence of a divine creativity that occurs when faithful souls seek to love the Lord as best they can. To such souls, restrictions and obstacles and difficulties simply become occasions for loving in a different way rather than a reason to stop loving altogether. The 'light, silent sound' of God's presence and activity is very much being heard right in the midst of all the wind, fire and earthquake created by the Coronavirus. We should be doing our best to listen for it, and to respond as best we can when we hear it.

At this moment, we don't know how long that wind and fire might continue; but we can be sure that God is giving special graces in this difficult time, specially present to us in a quieter (but no less powerful!) way. We can also be sure that we will need the lessons that He is trying to teach us, and the creativity He is trying to awaken in us, whenever the current crisis abates. Let's be honest: our diocese and all its parishes have been in a very serious *spiritual* health crisis for most of this past decade. Fallout from the sins of the past, declining numbers in both laity and available clergy, a serious disconnect with young Catholics and families... there has been an increasing sense in the last few years that these things are all but impossible to overcome, further sapping our hope for the future of Catholicism in our area. But is it just possible that this 'long Lent' of the Coronavirus might be preparing us for a tremendous Easter and Pentecost yet to come? Are these signs of creativity and focus on the essentials of our faith perhaps the Lord's means of preparation to call forth life from a valley of dry bones (cf. Ezekiel 37:1-14)— signs of an unprecedented joy that might follow an unprecedented suffering?

So throughout this time of quarantine, let's continue to be united with each other from our homes through our prayers and truly live our Catholic faith as fully, and creatively, as possible. Let's pray that our priests, who are in so much need of renewal, might recover their most essential priestly identity as they continue to offer Mass, pray, sacrifice and minister on our behalf. And let's pray for the Lord to truly work in us throughout this extended Lenten experience, so that the graces He is giving us now might be the foundation of our future.
