

IF YOU CANNOT GET TO CHURCH, THE CHURCH WILL GET TO YOU

by John C. Wester, Archbishop of Santa Fe

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

We are here, we are listening, as we journey hand in hand through this dreadful suffering each of us is experiencing. The sudden onset of COVID-19 created a world-wide seismic shift like no other we have experienced. The whole spectrum of our lives has been totally upended...spiritually, physically, psychological-ly, and economically. During these past two months, we have been bombarded by shocking global life/death statistics and have watched this novel virus directly impact our day-to-day lives. We speak a new language as we engage with this New Norm--social distancing, masking, sequester, flattening the curve, quarantine, massive job loss, recession...our sanctity of life threatened once again.

In New Mexico's earlier 400 years of faith, there were often extended periods of time when there was no access to the sacramental life of the Church. Our faithful would often have to wait weeks or months for a traveling priest to arrive at our missions to celebrate Mass and the sacraments. The deep faith of the communities sustained our people then; today, I see it now in the vibrant new seeds flourishing in our homes and smaller communities throughout our archdio-cese. Home is the holy place.

Now we prepare to embark upon a new phase in this New Norm: reentry. Reentry poses a new dilemma prompted by the urgency people are feeling to get back to work as they weigh their prospects of their economic survival against their physical survival.

I think some are engaged in the calculus that their prospects of survival are better if they open up their hair salon, their barbershop, their bowling alley, rather than staying indoors, taking necessary precautions by wearing a mask, social distancing and handwashing.

For us, ours is a very different calculus. The deep faith of our people is admirable, inspirational and life giving. The decision to close our churches was heart wrenching. It was based both on the protection of the sanctity of life and the economy wherein each fortifies the other: what we do to maintain good health practices and protect life is good for the economy. If the decision is made solely on the economy, it will hurt our health and thus hurt the economy in the long run. Thus, it is imperative we continue to stay the course; to comply by the directives of our state governor and public officials; and, to abide by our scientific experts' recommended precautionary measures to ensure our safety and that of our most vulnerable and impoverished brothers and sisters who, due to their respective living conditions, cannot follow social distancing and such decrees.

Pope Francis said, "Let us turn this time of pandemic into a test case to prepare for our collective future. Without an all-embracing vision, there will be no future for anyone."

It is important for us to understand the fullness of the pedagogy of the sacraments which shows us that Christ's presence is not constricted by our limitations. Yes, as the Second Vatican Council re-minds us, the Eucharist is the source and summit of who we are as Catholics, but we do not have to congregate at the Eucharistic to have the presence of Jesus Christ with us. "When two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there in the midst of them." (Matthew 18:20) It is not a question of being without the Lord versus being with the Lord. Our Lord is with us, very deeply with us and strongly with us, always. As I have been saying these past few weeks, "If you cannot get to Church, the Church will get to you!" Furthermore, it is likely we will be back to the altar table and Communion within a relatively short period of time.

The gift that we give each other is to keep that curve flat. This gift, this sacrifice on our part, is in itself Eucharistic since at every Mass we are asked to imitate Christ who gave freely of himself so that we all might have eternal life. As our government leaders have been reminding us, the more we stay home, the less likely an ER doctor will have to give a family the tragic news that their loved one has succumbed to COVID-19.

In mid-March, I assembled a rapid response team that meets twice a week to discuss how we as church can safely navigate through this pandemic and how we can begin our reentry as our state's COVID-19 restrictions begin to lift. Topics include safety and health, liturgical events, communications, financial considerations, education and human re-sources. You will be learning more about our reentry plans soon. ...

My dear People of God, I encourage you to join me in persevering as we abide by the protocols in place to keep us all safe. Please also join me in praying for all those who are dealing directly in any way with this insidious virus. Christ is with us always, until the end of the age, and his Blessed Mother, Health of Christians, is interceding for us, her beloved children. May God bless you and keep you safe now and always.



Sincerely yours in the Risen Lord.

Most Reverend John C. Wester

Archbishop of Santa Fe