**Our New Worship Environment**

**May 26, 2020**

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Over the past several weeks, much of America has been consumed with the question of when and how to resume activities that have been interrupted in order to contain the spread of the coronavirus. Each type of business or institution needs to discern how to fulfill its particular purpose without putting people at risk of contagion. For churches, the challenge is to create a worship environment where people can celebrate *prayerfully* and *joyfully*, without giving the virus an opportunity to spread among us. That is easier said than done.

When I first read the Bishop’s letter and the new Diocesan liturgical guidelines, describing all the precautions that we would have to observe at our masses on May 23-24, my heart sank. At first, I could not imagine celebrating Mass under those conditions. Many of our parishioners probably had a similar reaction to my letter, which explained how our masses at St. Bavo’s would look when we resumed public worship. Perhaps it is fortunate that the decree banning all singing came a week *later*, after I had started to recover from the initial shock. Once I removed all the hymnals and taped off every other pew and the middle third of each available pew, I surveyed the new look of our church and just wanted to cry. However, as the staff and I planned for “opening weekend,” I began to realize that we could actually do this well. Sure, our Sunday masses are now nearly indistinguishable from our simple, quiet weekday masses. But, those have always been prayerful and joyful, too. The important thing is that we can still gather as a community of faith to hear the Word of God, joyfully offer our sacrifice of thanks and praise, and share in the Eucharist. We can even exchange a “wave of peace” with our fellow believers a safe distance away.

Overall, I was pleased with our first weekend of masses under the new pandemic protocol. The crowds were very small – an average of about 30 people per mass – but I was fine with that, because it made things a little bit easier to manage. We had set up a video camera to livestream the Mass to the gym, just in case. Obviously, we didn’t need to use it yet, but we will be ready for overflow seating as more people start to come back. The hardest part for me was not being able to see anyone’s facial expressions, especially as I was preaching. That’s how I connect with the people of the assembly and gauge whether they are getting the message. At least I got to see their joy at receiving the Eucharist again.

We need to get used to this new worship environment, because I’m afraid it will be like this for quite a while. In the early days of the pandemic, we thought that the greatest danger of contagion was from feverish sick people coughing or sneezing on us, or touching surfaces with their contaminated hands. While visibly sick people certainly pose a threat, further research suggests that most people actually catch COVID-19 simply by breathing in close proximity to someone who has the virus, but is not yet showing any symptoms of illness. That’s why we need masks to protect us from the tiny droplets that everyone expels whenever they speak. They are the *greater* danger, as they are too fine to see and they can remain suspended in the air for hours. I expect *masks and distancing* to be the norm in churches and in other indoor public spaces for several more weeks. Even if we eventually phase out those precautions, they will likely come back again in the fall and winter, with a resurgence of COVID-19 and flu.

If this way of celebrating Mass leaves you feeling depressed, consider the alternative. There have been numerous news reports just in the past week of churches becoming sites of large COVID-19 outbreaks. While most of these congregations were careful to space families six feet apart, none of them required masks or banned singing. In other words, they instituted *some* protective measures, but ignored the *most effective ones*. Thus, they put everyone in danger and ended up causing their church to be shut down again. Keep in mind that if a Catholic parish has an outbreak, or if one of their priests tests positive for COVID-19, that parish is going to close immediately and for an indefinite period of time. That already happened in Elkhart last week, and it could happen elsewhere. If several parishes have outbreaks, then the whole Diocese may shut down again. It pays to take extra precautions, so that we can worship *in peace*, without having to worry about any of those scenarios playing out here.

Just so you know, I got tested for COVID on May 18, because I had been experiencing symptoms that *could* have been caused by the virus. Fortunately, my results came back *negative*. Apparently, I was just suffering from a combination of terrible allergies, mild asthma, lack of sleep, and stress. Now that diagnostic testing is more readily available without a doctor’s referral, I plan to get tested every two weeks or so. Frankly, I think it would be wise for all parish priests to do the same. I consider it my duty as your Pastor to make sure that I am not putting any of you in danger.

Now that we have made it through our first weekend, I feel much better about our ability to worship together safely and prayerfully. All of our parishioners were very compliant and cooperative. People seemed very happy to be back in church again. I hope that more of our people decide to come back and give it a try, although I still encourage those at high risk to stay home. In the meantime, all of us should pray that the loosening of restrictions more generally does not lead to a significant increase in COVID cases in our local area, as it already has in many parts of the country. If we remain careful and vigilant, and if we continue to put the safety of others first, we can get through this together.