**Social Distancing as Fasting and Communion**

I had never heard the term “social distancing” before this COVID-19 pandemic. But, as a Catholic, I certainly have heard a lot about fasting over the years, especially during Lent. It seems to me that the two concepts are now merging into one, as social distancing has become a new and unwelcome form of fasting imposed on all of us.

 Every year, at the beginning of Lent, I strongly encourage the faithful to pursue spiritual practices that have purpose and meaning. Fasting, in particular, should not be merely an exercise in willpower, intended to build up one’s ego. (“Look at me and my self-control.”) All spiritual practices should contribute both to the spiritual growth of the individual and to the common good. The communal aspect is often discounted, because the good that we do for the community is usually a natural consequence of our personal growth, rather than our primary objective. For example, people who develop better prayer habits tend to become more peaceful and more patient with everyone they meet. People who give alms tend to become more generous with everybody, not just with the poor. And people who fast from things to which they had become inordinately attached tend to become less compulsive and more self-aware, which makes them more sensitive to the way they treat the people around them. Hence, our personal choices and efforts to change our personal habits can have far-reaching consequences for the community.

Now we are being asked, or even forced, to fast from all sorts of activities that are very important to us (even the celebration of the Mass!) in order to minimize the transmission of a dangerous and highly contagious disease. Some young, healthy people have chafed at the restrictions, citing the medical evidence that they are unlikely to suffer any serious consequences from a COVID-19 infection. Actually, the risk may be higher than they think. But more importantly, that selfish perspective misses the point of what we (collectively) are trying to accomplish with these precautions. We who are in less danger of serious illness must isolate ourselves in order to protect others who are more vulnerable. Maybe we will end up with nothing more than a slight cough and a low-grade fever for a few days, but the person we infect might end up on a ventilator or worse. We are being asked to fast from our normal activities not just for our own health, but to safeguard the health of those who are most at risk. For most of us, social distancing is primarily about the common good, not self-protection.

For us Catholics, the most difficult aspect of social distancing has to be the suspension of public masses. Until the crisis passes, we cannot gather to celebrate the Eucharist, the “source and summit of the Christian life!” We long for that spiritual nourishment, our weekly or even daily “communion” with Christ. However, we must remember that the Eucharist is communion not only with Christ, but also with our brothers and sisters who together form the living Body of Christ in the world. It is precisely that communion which we are being asked to consider as we fast from Mass and all our other normal activities. Paradoxically, our willingness to isolate ourselves from others at this time is, in fact, an expression of our communion with them. This fasting is an act of love, unlike any that has ever been asked or required of us in the past. Let us willingly offer this sacrifice as an act of love and communion for others, especially for the most fragile and vulnerable members of our community.

Even as public masses are suspended, all priests are expected to celebrate daily private Mass. On Sundays, all Pastors are required by Canon Law to offer a “missa pro populo,” or a mass for the people of their parish. That practice will continue throughout this health crisis. So, the People of St. Bavo’s can rest assured that I will not only pray for you on a daily basis, but I will also offer a mass for you and your intentions every Sunday, until we can again gather as a parish family to worship together.

In the weeks ahead, may your longing for the sacramental Body and Blood of Christ and your longing for companionship and intimacy with other people increase your appreciation for the living Body of Christ, this community which now depends on your selflessness to keep them safe. May God bless all of you and your families.

Your Pastor,

Fr. Pete