

WHAT I HAVE SEEN AND HEARD

By Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory

Archbishop of Washington

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‘New normal’ from coronavirus can be a time to open our hearts more to God and each other

I have heard two words recently that I had not heard in a very long time: *plague* and *pestilence*. Both are referenced many times in Scripture; both carry connotations of a dark and distant past. Biblical, medieval, or modern, we have all read about prior pandemics. The bubonic plague that decimated Europe during the 14th century and the Spanish Flu that wreaked havoc at the beginning of the 20th were events to which only historians and medical professionals these days express much more than a passing interest.

We have faced other global health challenges just since the turn of this century – MERS, Ebola, SARS and the Swine Flu, for example – but even their significance is diminished unless they directly impacted us somehow. Separated by time and distance, bolstered by what seem to be almost instantaneous advances in modern medicine, we rest pretty easy.

What we face in COVID-19 is unsettling to us because it is so unpredictable, so pervasive, so close and so current. As our planet grows smaller, events half a world away can rapidly find their way into our neighborhoods and even our homes. We

find ourselves both concerned about and responsible for one another in ways that only a few weeks ago we would not have imagined.

Our lives been altered indefinitely by a virus that seems to have originated halfway around the world and is now everywhere. Despite laudable best efforts, our medical and scientific communities have been unable to assuage our anxiety. It is a disease that reminds us how incredibly fragile we are, how little control we exercise, and how completely we rely on the One who made us and keeps watch over us.

I honestly never dreamed I would live in a moment where the same disquieting circumstances that compel us as Catholics to want to gather more frequently in worship, prayer and solidarity would also prevent us from being able to do so securely – when so many of a generation who find their deepest solace in the Mass would find themselves most at risk simply by their participation in it.

I never dreamed as a bishop that one day my best pastoral option would not involve expanding access to the Eucharist but suspending it, let alone at a time of such distress in the Church and in the world. Even the term, “social distancing,” while scientifically understood to be the most efficacious approach to averting the potential catastrophe that is the coronavirus, seems like an oxymoron that wholly contradicts the mission of Christ’s Church to go and make disciples.

Yet even in the uncertainty of this current situation, if we are open, God will use this moment to bring our hearts closer to Him and more firmly in union with one another. As we grudgingly distance ourselves physically to slow the spread of this heinous virus, we find ourselves missing many things we, myself included, may have come to take for granted. We long for opportunities simply to be together again, whether

at work or school; a restaurant or store; a stadium, concert, museum, or play; or worshipping with our family of faith around the Lord's Table.

We look forward to a day when we can merely encounter one another without fear of either spreading or being infected by disease. Pope Francis has emphasized the value of "encountering and accompanying" others on the journey of faith. These days we wait in joyful hope just for the restoration of simple, regular interactions.

As we have temporarily set aside public worship during this time of necessary social separation, we value the gift of assembled common prayer even more. We believe as Catholics that we are always united together spiritually as the Church transcends both time and distance. We have always understood our union to be something more profound and enduring than mere physical proximity. Still, our sacramental common prayer is a great gift we now miss, its temporary absence a cross we now endure – an unanticipated penance none of us could or would have planned even as Lent recently began on Ash Wednesday.

As life seeks out its new normal, I pray that we are able to apply the lessons of this exceptionally barren Lenten journey to redefine "normal" so that it includes more gratitude, appreciation, service, mercy and joy. Returning to our ordinary patterns of life is something that we all hope will occur very soon. Let us bring the memories of these moments with us into the future so that we better value and cherish what may have become under-appreciated opportunities to be in the presence of our Savior and each other.

This disease will not get the best *of* us; rather, we implore our merciful God to use it to bring out the best *in* us.