

What's the Right Way for Church Leaders to Respond to the Corona Virus?

By Daniel Conway

An editorial reprinted with permission from *The Criterion*, weekly newspaper of the Archdiocese of Indianapolis

Indianapolis Archbishop Charles C. Thompson has often reminded us that the Catholic Church's position on important issues is rarely "an either/or." Most often, our Church views things from a more inclusive "both/and" perspective. So, for example, we both love sinners and hate the sins they commit. And we believe that God is both just and merciful, both holding us accountable for our actions and allowing us ample opportunities to repent and seek his forgiveness.

The Catholic Church's response to the COVID-19 Corona Virus pandemic reflects this both/and perspective. On the one hand, we must act out of an abundance of caution in order to protect the health and well-being of everyone. On the other hand, in these most challenging times we place our trust in the healing power of God, and, in the final analysis, we turn to him alone. As a result, the pope and our bishops and pastors must guide us in both trusting God and respecting the decisions of civil authorities and medical professionals.

As is always the case in these situations, translating moral principles into practical actions requires prudence and, in many cases, courage. Benedictine Father Mark O'Keefe, Professor of Moral Theology at Saint Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology, addresses this issue in his book *Virtues Abounding: St. Thomas Aquinas on the Cardinal and Related Virtues for Today*. According to Father Mark in the Introduction to his book:

The Catholic Church, of course, continues to believe in moral rules that can be applied generally. There are some things that are black or white, right or wrong. Still, even contemporary Catholic teaching reflects a greater sense that there is more ambiguity than we might once have thought, and there are more areas in which people really do have to decide for themselves about what's right or wrong for them in a particular situation. There is black and white, but there are also areas of gray.

The worldwide crisis (pandemic) we are experiencing now presents our Church with plenty of gray areas. On the one hand, the obligation to attend Mass on Sunday is sacred. For people who are healthy enough to participate, the graces received through participation in the holy Eucharist are needed now more than ever as we confront this personal and global crisis. On the other hand, the common good of all requires that the virus be contained and that we eliminate the public health risks presented by large gatherings of people.

As a result, bishops in various regions of the world, including Rome, have suspended public celebrations of the Sunday liturgy. Others, including Archbishop Thompson, have dispensed Catholics in their dioceses from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass until further notice. Members of the faithful who are elderly, particularly those with underlying health conditions,

and those with a comprised immune system or who are ill are especially being encouraged to take advantage of this dispensation.

In addition, in the Archdiocese of Indianapolis, and many other dioceses in the U.S. and throughout the world, schools are being closed and church activities are being severely curtailed except when necessary to care for the pastoral needs of people, especially the poor and vulnerable. These unprecedented steps are being taken out of an abundance of caution, and with profound respect for the health and safety of all, but these decisions remain controversial—well within the gray areas of moral decision-making.

Some argue that it's a mistake to restrict access to the grace of the Eucharist during this critical time. Others, including Pope Francis, worry that efforts to contain the spread of this potentially deadly virus—while necessary in many cases—will cause us to turn inward and neglect those who are most in need of our care and assistance. That's why the Vatican has repeatedly assured the world community of the Holy See's continuing support for healthcare professionals and facilities in various parts of the world, especially in very remote areas in great difficulty, trusting in the active solidarity of all.

The fact is that the Church must make a prudent, courageous decision to both affirm the truth of God's presence and healing power and to participate in the very practical efforts to contain the spread of the Coronavirus by limiting public gatherings and social interactions. The both/and principle is vitally important here.

During this most difficult time in the life of our Church, and our local, state, national and global communities, it's more important than ever to observe the Lenten practices of prayer, self-denial and stewardship of all God's gifts. Let's take care of ourselves and, at the same time, care for the needs of others. Let's also pray that the wisdom of "the Catholic both/and" will guide Church leaders through the gray areas to the light of Christ.