

Faith in the time of Coronavirus



James Martin, S.J. March 13, 2020

Jun Lee, a Catholic from South Korea, prays in front of an image of Our Lady of Guadalupe at St. James Cathedral in Seattle on March 12, 2020. On March 11, the Archdiocese of Seattle became the first in the country to announce the temporary suspension of all public Masses to help prevent the spread of coronavirus. Places of worship in the archdiocese are still open for prayer. (CNS photo/Jason Redmond, Reuters)

The coronavirus pandemic is confusing and frightening for hundreds of millions of people. That is not surprising. Many around the world are sick and many others have died. Unless the situation changes dramatically, many more will fall ill and die around the globe. This crisis raises serious medical, ethical and logistical questions. But it raises additional questions for people of faith. So I would like to offer some advice from the Christian tradition, Ignatian spirituality and my own experience.

Resist panic. This is not to say there is no reason to be concerned, or that we should ignore the sound advice of medical professionals and public health experts. But panic and fear are not from God. Calm and hope are. And it is possible to respond to a crisis seriously and deliberately while maintaining an inner sense of calm and hope.

St. Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, often talked about two forces in our interior lives: one that draws us toward God and the other away from God. The one that draws us away from God, which he labeled the evil spirit, “causes gnawing anxiety, saddens and sets up obstacles. In this way it unsettles people by false reasons aimed at preventing their progress.” Sound familiar? Don’t lend credence to lies or rumors, or give in to panic. Trust what medical experts tell you, not those who fear monger. There is a reason they call Satan the “Prince of Lies.”

Panic, by confusing and frightening you, pulls you away from the help God wants to give you. It is not coming from God. What *is* coming from God? St. Ignatius tells us: God’s spirit “stirs up courage and strength, consolations, inspirations and tranquility.” So trust in the calm and hope you feel. That is the voice to listen to.

“Do not be afraid!,” as Jesus said many times.

Do not demonize. The other day a friend told me that when an elderly Chinese man got onto a subway car in New York City, the car emptied out as people started shouting slurs at him, blaming his country for spreading the virus. Resist the temptation to demonize or scapegoat, which increases in time of stress and shortages. Covid-19 is not a Chinese disease; it is not a “foreign” disease. It is no one’s “fault.” Likewise, the people who become infected are not to blame. Remember that Jesus was asked about a blind man: “Who sinned, that this man was born blind?” Jesus’ response: “No one” (Jn 9:2). Illness is not a punishment. So don’t demonize and don’t hate.

Many things have been cancelled because of the coronavirus. Love is not one of them.

“Do not be afraid!,” as Jesus said many times.

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Care for the sick. This pandemic may be a long haul; some of our friends and family may get sick and perhaps die. Do what you can to help others, especially the elderly, disabled, poor and isolated. Take the necessary precautions; don’t be reckless and don’t risk spreading the disease, but also don’t forget the fundamental

Christian duty to help others. “I was sick, and you came to visit me,” said Jesus (Mt 25). And remember that Jesus lived during a time when people had no access to even the most rudimentary medical care, and so visiting the sick was just as dangerous, if not more, than it is today. Part of the Christian tradition is caring for the sick, even at some personal cost.

And do not close your hearts to the poor and those who have no or limited healthcare. Refugees, the homeless and migrants, for example, will suffer even more than the general population. Keep your heart open to all those in need. Don’t let your conscience become infected, too.

Pray. Catholic churches around the world are closing, with Masses and other parish services cancelled by many bishops. These are prudent and necessary measures designed to keep people healthy. But they come at some cost: For many people, this removes one of the most consoling parts of their lives—the Mass and the Eucharist—and isolates them even more from the community at a time when they most need support.

What can one do instead? Well, there are many televised and livestreamed Masses available, as well as ones broadcast on the radio. But even if you can’t find one, you can pray on your own. When you do, remember that you’re still part of a community. There is also the longstanding tradition in our church of receiving a “spiritual communion,” when, if you cannot participate in the Mass in person, you unite yourself with God in prayer.

Remember that you’re still part of a community.
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And be creative. You can meditate on the Sunday Gospel on your own, consult a Bible commentary about the readings, gather your family to talk about the Gospel or call friends and share your experiences of how God is present to you, even in the midst of a crisis. The persecuted Christians in the early church prayed and shared their faith in the catacombs, and we can do the same. Remember that Jesus said, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Mt. 18:20). Remember too that the church is not a building. It is the community.

Trust that God is with you. Many people, especially those who are sick, may feel a sense of isolation that compounds their fear. And many of us, even if we’re not infected, will know people who are sick and even die. So most will naturally ask: Why is this happening?

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There is no satisfactory answer to that question, which at its core is the question of why suffering exists, something that saints and theologians have pondered over the centuries. In the end, it is the greatest of mysteries. And the question is: Can you believe in a God that you don’t understand?

At the same time, we know that Jesus understands our suffering and accompanies us in the most intimate of ways. Remember that during his public ministry Jesus spent a great deal of time with those who were sick. And before modern medicine, almost any infection could kill you. Thus, lifespans were short: only 30 or 40 years. In other words, Jesus knew the world of illness.

Jesus, then, understands all the fears and worries that you have. Jesus understands you, not only because he is divine and understands all things but because he is human and experienced all things. Go to him in prayer. And trust that he hears you and is with you.

Trust in my prayers, too. We will move through this together, with God’s help.

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