

The presence of Jesus in all the mobile monstrances
A response to the article by Fr. John Christman, SSS

Fr. Christman, SSS, wrote his reflection *Coronavirus, the Cup, and Cancellations* on March 19. It was clear that we are living in very fluid times. I am writing this reflection a week later and much has changed again. Over half the US population is now under mandatory lockdown. On March 18, there were 7,000 diagnosed cases of coronavirus in the US, with 141 deaths, Today the United States surpassed China in the number of diagnosed cases with 87,400 and 1,170 deaths. We are told that the peak of the virus is yet 3 or 4 weeks in the future and hospitals across the country bewail the fact that they will not have sufficient beds, ventilators or enough masks, gowns, gloves and other protective gear for doctors and nurses.

Fr. Christman noted on March 19 that the buildup of safeguards might lead to the closing of churches. We are now moving into our second weekend of no public Masses and we learned that there would be no public celebrations of Holy Week or Easter. The ban on public gatherings, some forecast, could extend well into May, We are all fasting from the Eucharist and will continue to do so.

Things have moved very swiftly in a week and there are no signs that this pandemic will not continue to wreak death, suffering and havoc in the weeks and maybe months ahead.

Fr. Christman rightfully took note of one of the characteristic virtues of Americans, our individualism which is often carried to extremes. Such a global and national crisis as the coronavirus can certainly provide an environment to intensify even further this trait. It can lead to a "survival of the fittest" mentality with a total disregard for the dangers of spreading this disease to others. On the evening news last week the camera offered a wide-angle view of a beach in Florida with hundreds of people, mostly young, enjoying themselves. One young woman shouted, "This is *MY* spring break and I'm going to enjoy it!" This hyper-individualism has led to the hoarding of home supplies and the disdain for the suggested or required social distancing.

But there is another competing American virtue and that is American generosity and a sense of community. When Governor Cuomo of New York asked retired medical personnel to return to work to help with the over-crowded and overworked doctors and nurses in his state, he reported that in one day 40,000 retired professionals responded. A similar response was had when mental health professionals were asked to help maintain phone lines for the many people suffering from the increased anxiety and depression that such a crisis can evoke. My wife has joined a large contingent of women who are sewing face masks, which cannot be used to protect from the virus but can help to prevent the communal spread of the disease. One cannot but mention teachers who have been forced to learn and use new skills in terms of connecting with their students electronically to help them to keep up with their studies. There is now a long term task of love and support as it is clear that most schools will not reopen this year. They are now wrestling with how they can provide seniors with some form of virtual proms and graduations...rites of passage for our young people. As individualism has raised its head

so has the shining image of generosity and community. Perhaps the coronavirus might have given a boost to our solidarity, to our sense of mutual interdependence, our “Communio.”

My reflection on Eucharist these days centers again on Jesus’ words, “This is my body broken for you;” “This is my blood poured out for you:” “ Do this in remembrance of me.” My meditation leads me to our hospitals where the Body of Christ is broken on the white covered altar-like beds of those struggling to breathe, those too weak and sick to care for themselves. Christ’s blood is poured out by the doctors, nurses, technicians and health care workers who work tirelessly, well beyond their assigned shifts, to tend to these broken bodies. Not a few of these men and women have already given their all to this service of love and care and, having been infected with the virus, have died. Because of the highly contagious nature of the virus, once a patient is admitted, no one from the outside can visit them. The only presence of the mediated love of God that they experience, as they breathe their last, are these dedicated men and women who are poured out for them. They consciously or unconsciously have responded to the call of Jesus to love and to serve, to “do this memory of him.” Our churches are closed but for me the Eucharist continues to be celebrated in our hospitals where there is a Real Presence of Jesus.

I would like to use one of the images of Pope Francis when he describes the Real Presence. He certainly prioritizes the presence of Jesus in the Eucharistic Bread, But he also sees the Real Presence in what he calls “mobile monstrances.” He uses that image in relationship to the poor, but I would like to suggest that it could also refer to the health care professionals who, by their loving care, make Jesus present in the hyper-busy and almost chaotic wards of our hospitals where there is so much suffering and death.

One other point of reflection. Though I am not big on “indulgences,” I was struck with the actions of Pope Francis in the past week. Plenary indulgences are by church teaching a very powerful aid in our salvation. They remit all the temporal punishment due us for our sinfulness. They are granted under certain circumstances with the condition that the recipient go to confession whenever the next occasion arises, receive Holy Communion, be free of mortal sin and say an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be for the intention of the Holy Father.

We know that a central focus of Pope Francis’ papacy has been the great mercy of God. At this present moment with hundreds of thousands of people throughout the world seriously ill, thousands dying, churches closed, priests isolated and the pope himself a prisoner of the Vatican, a shepherd unable to be with his suffering brothers and sisters, Pope Francis literally “broke open” the “treasury of mercy.”

On March 20 the apostolic penitentiary, at the behest of the Holy Father, granted a plenary indulgence to any Catholic affected by the virus, to health care workers and their families and to anyone who prays for the end of the epidemic. All they have to do is prayerfully watch the celebration of Mass, pray the rosary, make the stations of the cross, or pray

any other devotion. This same indulgence is granted to a person dying of the virus “if they have EVER prayed.”

One theologian wrote that this graciousness is meant to say to those who are suffering, “Know that you are not alone. It will be OK.”

Another theologian remarked that “indulgences, in the hands of Francis, must be seen in the context of his dream of a loving, merciful, pardoning, welcoming Church.”

Those are my reflections a week after reflecting on the very-thought provoking reflections of Fr. Christman. So much has happened in a week! I have no idea what our lives will be like a week or a month from now. We continue to need each other and the gracious love of God who remains close and faithful to us especially in the most difficult times of our lives.

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