

Coronavirus Assessment & Update from Fr. Steven

Friday, July 17, 2020

Dear Parish Faithful,

I would like to reassess just where we are as a parish as we continue to be deeply affected by the coronavirus. It has certainly been a long time since we have all been together, as our last full parish Divine Liturgy was on March 8. Perhaps it was being naive, but I was hoping that we would be much closer to reopening the parish - at least to a much greater extent - at this point in July. If I recall, these hopes go back to June 1, when our state did begin to open up a good deal, as did the parish. At that point in time, we had already passed through the harrowing months of March - May, and we were anticipating a "new spring." Unfortunately, and to our great disappointment and frustration, it was not to be. We are going through something like Phase II of the coronavirus, and we have had to act accordingly, being realistic rather than careless. (I would like to examine a close and systematic study as to how Asia and Europe have so successfully flattened their curves, throughout their respective continents. in a way that we have not been able to do). Of course, people are making their own reassessments and drawing different conclusions. But I feel confident that we do have a scientific community filled with concerned professionals who are doing their best to offer prudent guidance. All of our theological and spiritual reflection is in no way compromised by scientific data. We can go "deeper" than the data, but we always need to be grounded in reality.

So, as our own Hamilton County has been designated as a "hot spot," earning us an unenviable place in the "red zone," I would like to digress for the moment and share some of the statewide TV remarks made by Gov. Mike DeWine on Wednesday. The governor caught our attention by saying: "Our state life is now in danger." From his speech we heard further:

"We have now reached our most critical point in our battle against the coronavirus ... But, what your local health department, or the Ohio Department of Health, or I order is not nearly as important as what we all do in these crucial days ahead. Our future truly lies in our own hands."

"Ohio is sliding down a very dangerous path, with our once-flattened curve starting to sharpen and spike. This worrisome, disturbing reversal of our progress is a jarring reminder of just how quickly our fate can change. A matter of weeks can change our trajectory. Weeks can be the difference between who lives and who dies in Ohio."

"We must act now!"

"This is not a drill."

"This is not a hoax."

"This is not a dress rehearsal."

"It's the real thing."

"The enemy is here - and Ohioans have simply come too far in this fight to cede ground now to the enemy."

"So our kids can be in school this fall ... So they can at least have a chance to play sports. So our businesses can remain open. So Ohioans can continue earning a living and a paycheck."

After citing statistics that reveal just how many more cases we now have in Ohio, Gov. DeWine offered some practical advice that includes protecting each other by wearing face masks, social distancing and smarter choices in what Ohioans do. I am not neglecting our many parishioners from Kentucky and Indiana. I am sure that they are hearing the same basic message from their civil leaders. But since our church is here in the Cincinnati area, I am focusing my overall attention on what is happening in Hamilton County.

Subsequent to writing the above, I received just yesterday some more reassuring news from Steve Mayhugh, our parish council V.P. who supplies me with regular updates:

This afternoon, the governor announced that things are getting better in Hamilton County. It is still in the "Red" zone, but Hamilton & Butler Counties have both been taken off of the "watch list". As long as people maintain social distancing, wear their masks, etc., Hamilton Co., and the surrounding counties, may make their way back to level 2. We'll see. But, yes, according to the governor, things are getting better in Hamilton Co, and we will not be heading into the purple this week.

Glad to hear it!

I would simply reinforce the same practical guidelines for our daily lives. This is not the time to embrace "anti-mask rhetoric." (Ask the Asians and Europeans if wearing a mask has helped them flatten their curves). Wearing a mask - even if it is "mandated" - has nothing to do with violating our "rights" or our "freedom." Both will be there to enjoy in a safer environment if we show some restraint and discipline today. According to the Hamilton County health commissioner, if 80% of people wore masks COVID-19 cases will decrease. Since we are all in this together, it is simply time to be a neighbor to one another. It is a simple form of charity and recognition of the "other." Whatever the level of inconvenience involved, that seems to be the "Christian" thing to do. And, of course, one must wear a mask in the church, as well as practice social distancing, until further directives are given one day that "the coast is clear." The pastoral decisions that I am making about our worship services are not made in isolation. I follow Archbishop Paul's diocesan directives, and I speak with him on a regular basis. In addition, I am also seek the professional advice of respected physicians, and I deeply appreciate their input. And that advice is always consistently the same.

Based on that input, we are still holding steady at twenty-five worshipers, with the hope that we can increase that soon.

At the same time, however, I remain deeply concerned as to the effect of our lengthy separation from each other as a parish community. The postponement of reopening the parish in a more wide-ranging manner will inevitably take its toll. Our "new normal" is the abnormal condition of not being together. If that bothers

you, then I am glad to hear it, for it certainly bothers me! Archbishop Paul just sent us a letter blessing post-Liturgy outdoor "refreshment hours," during which social distancing must be practiced, but I do not think that that would work with our parish based on the layout of our property. At the same time, there is no real interest in our zoom fellowship hours scheduled for noon on Sundays. Could be "zoom fatigue," could be we are growing indifferent about "seeing" each other.

God did not "send" the coronavirus for whatever divine reason our minds are drawn to speculate about. However, in God's providence, God "allowed" the coronavirus. Though not directly willed by God, this crisis becomes a test of our faithfulness and commitment to Christ. All those who have perished, we place in the hands of God; those who are ill, we pray for their recovery. And a test is one that reveals our character as to how we respond. That would include how we treat each other and care for one another. Although not in church, we need not become indifferent to our relationship with God. The real Church is not a temple made by hands. It is the Body of Christ, and we are each a "living stone" that makes up that Body regardless of our life circumstances. As St. John Chrysostom once famously said: the home is a little church. In our multiple "little churches," let us expand our minds and hearts by praying for one another.

- Fr Steven