



Volume 4/Issue 11 - Christmas 2020

# The Family Apostolate <sup>\$8</sup>

Where Faith and Family Meet



## UNBROKEN

- Listening When God Speaks...
- COVID 19: The Musings of a Parish Priest
- The Amazing Joy of Giving
- What is Spiritual Communion?

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Do you have any questions  
on  
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# Editorial

## *We remain unbroken in Christ*

In this special Christmas edition, our writers have done such a beautiful work of bringing out the positive spots during this trying period. They have challenged us to be intentional about identifying the good in the big picture, to value what our faith presents to us, and to appreciate the gift of human interrelationships. Saint Paul's statement to the Roman Church is appropriate for our time, "Can anything cut us off from the love of Christ – can hardships or distress, or persecution, or lack of food and clothing, or threats or violence?" (8:35-36) Obviously, the effects of the corona virus might not be over yet. Medicine has not succeeded in finding the solution for COVID, the economy is still struggling, people are still reeling from the effects of the crises, yet we shall not succumb to the whims of this challenging times.

Our message for our readers is to live in hope. Hope might not take away trials and tribulations, but provides a certitude that God is with us through difficult circumstances. Saint Paul describes the certitude this way, "For I am certain of this: neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nothing already in existence, and nothing still to come, nor any power, nor the heights nor the depths, nor any created thing whatever, will be able to come between us and the love of God known to us in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38-39).

Hence, we have titled this edition of the magazine, UNBROKEN.  
God bless you, and Merry Christmas.



Fr. Vin



*Wishing you and your family  
a spirit-filled  
Christmas  
&  
a blessed New Year*

**FA TEAM**

# Spiritual COMMUNION

Fr. Michael DeAscanis

*A lot of Catholics want to know the meaning, significance, and efficacy of Spiritual Communion. Can it still be practiced after the lockdown? Can priests grant parishioners the dispensation to participate in spiritual communion rather than physical attendance at Mass? Let's discuss the theology of this practice, which became popular during the COVID.*

One afternoon in the middle of May, during the stay-at-home order in Baltimore caused by the corona-virus, I came upon a woman standing outside the locked doors of church. I cheerily said hello to the woman, but when she turned towards me, I realized that she was crying. She said, "I need to see Him!" She was referring to Jesus in the Holy Eucharist. Parishioners had not been permitted to receive Holy Communion, or even to pray in church before the tabernacle, for nine weeks. As Catholics, we have a friendship with Jesus in the Eucharist. It is His presence on earth with us, and she missed Him!

During the three months that churches in the United States were closed to public worship, our bishops recommended the practice of spiritual communion while watching Mass live-streamed online. Though people could not receive Jesus

sacramentally in Holy Communion, they could receive Him spiritually. Even though churches reopened this past June, and public Masses have resumed, some people are still reluctant to leave their homes, so this is still a relevant question.

Let us consider a few questions about Spiritual Communion.

### What is "communion"?

Communion is the meaning of life! God made humans with the intent that we would have communion with one another and with Him. Communion means being "in union with." Our souls are to be linked. We are to love one another and love God. We are meant to be in communion with one another and with God during this life on earth, and eternally in heaven.

Marriage is one powerful way to be in communion with another, not just spiritually

or emotionally, but also physically, through the uniting of the bodies of the husband and wife. Similarly, the Sacrament of Holy Communion is a powerful, visible way to be in communion with God; when we consume the body of Jesus, He becomes part of our body and soul.

### What is a "spiritual communion"?

It is the act of inviting the presence of God into your soul. St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) described it as "an ardent desire to receive Jesus in the most holy sacrament and lovingly embrace him" at a time or in circumstances when we cannot receive him in sacramental Communion. St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) said, "When you do not receive Communion and you do not attend Mass, you can make a spiritual communion, which is a most beneficial practice; by it the love of God will be greatly impressed on you." St. John Vianney (1786-1859), patron saint of

priests, said "when we feel the love of God growing cold, let us instantly make a spiritual communion. When we cannot go to the church, let us turn towards the tabernacle; no wall can shut us out from the good God."

Catholics understand that God doesn't simply want to exist outside of us, but rather within us, in our souls. He wants to dwell in us. The Holy Spirit of God enters our soul anytime we receive a Sacrament. We can also receive the Holy Spirit anytime we pray, inviting Him into our souls.

The act of spiritual communion, however, expresses a desire to receive the effects of Holy Communion, even when the Sacrament itself is not available. It is a request for the direct blessing of Jesus, such as that given through Holy Communion.

### Are there Scriptural references to spiritual communion?

While the Bible does not use the term "spiritual communion", it does make different references to God's desire to dwell within us. Jesus speaks of this at the Last Supper, the night before he died, as recorded in John's Gospel. "I pray not only for them . . . that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us. . . I have given them the glory you gave me, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may be brought to perfection as one." (John 17:20-23)

St. Paul also speaks about the desire of the Holy Spirit to dwell in us. "[He] who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through His Spirit that dwells in you." (Romans 8:11) We also see this in his letter to the Corinthians, "Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God." (1 Corinthians 6:19)

### Where and when can one make a spiritual communion?

Normally we would make a spiritual communion when attending Mass or watching a televised Mass.

### Here are some scenarios of those attending Mass who could ask God

### for the benefit of a spiritual communion:

- a Catholic who attends Mass but has not fasted an hour beforehand and so cannot receive Holy Communion
- a Catholic who has committed a serious sin and needs to go to Confession before returning to Holy Communion
- a non-Catholic who attends Mass, such as an RCIA candidate or someone married to a Catholic spouse

Here are some scenarios of those watching Mass from home who could make a spiritual communion:

- a parent who needs to stay home from Sunday Mass to care for a sick child
- an elderly or sick person who is confined

It is the act of inviting the presence of God into your soul.

to their home and thus unable to get to Mass

- a person unable to attend Mass because churches are closed due to the corona virus

For televised Masses, it is strongly recommended to watch a live Mass and to pray along. There is a difference between watching Mass and praying Mass.

It is possible to make a spiritual communion even if not participating in Mass. One good practice is to make a spiritual communion whenever driving past a Catholic church. Recognize that Jesus is present in that church in the tabernacle, make a sign of the cross, and offer a spiritual communion prayer.

### Is permission needed for a spiritual communion?

A spiritual communion is a private act of reverence, and thus does not require permission. It can be made at different



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times for different purposes. But you do need a dispensation for missing Sunday Mass. This dispensation can be given by your parish priest for individual cases, or can be given by your bishop for the diocese as a whole.

### How should one make a spiritual communion?

St. Peter Julian Eymard (1811-1868) suggested the following format:

"Conceive a real desire to be united to Jesus by acknowledging the need you have for His love; arouse yourself to perfect contrition for all your sins; offer a prayer for spiritual communion and invite Jesus into your inmost soul, entreating Him to give you the grace to live well; offer a prayer of thanksgiving and beg the blessing of Jesus Christ upon yourself and all your relatives and friends."

Here is the Spiritual Communion Prayer recommended in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, which was written by St. Alphonsus Liguori (1696-1787):

*My Jesus, I believe that you are present in the most holy Sacrament. I love you above all things and desire to receive you into my soul. Since I cannot at this moment receive you sacramentally, come at least spiritually into my heart. I embrace you as if you were already there, and unite myself wholly to you. Never permit me to be separated from you. Amen.*

### Conclusion

As the woman in the church parking lot said with such emotion, "I need to see Him," we are made for communion with God, through Jesus. Seek Him in Holy Communion when you are able to attend Mass and are properly prepared. And seek Him in spiritual communions as well!

[Biblical quotations are taken from the New American Bible.]

# How the light of my vocation shone in the darkness

Meredith Rubeling



On the morning of December 28, 2019, I was filled with tremendous anxiety and apprehension. The following day was my little sister's wedding. As horrible as it is to admit, I had dreaded her wedding day for years. She is eight years younger than me, and I had convinced myself that if she got married before I did, then I had somehow "failed" as an individual. As her older sister, I expected to have reached that vocational milestone first. I remember feeling unseen, forgotten, and overlooked by God. I had prayed that He would reveal my vocation for so many years, and now I had to endure the pain of watching someone so close to me receive something I had desperately desired. My mindset was extremely selfish, but so often in our desperation, we become so fixated on ourselves, that we can't focus on anyone else.

In an effort to ease the anticipated pain of the day, I reached out to many close friends, and asked them to pray for me, that I might be able to experience genuine joy and happiness for my sister and her husband on their wedding day. Their wedding was so incredibly grace-filled and holy. They have such a beautiful relationship of mutual respect, trust, and purity; it reflects the love

of Christ and His Church. God flooded my soul with peace and joy that day which I considered truly miraculous! I felt so genuinely happy for them. In the best way, God broke my spirit that day, and it was as if a pressure valve on my life had been released. I had seen that God really can move mountains, and allow us to overcome things that terrify us. I saw evidence of this that day. He had shifted my mindset; He allowed me not to wallow in self-pity at the joys of others, but to rejoice with them! Through an outpouring of love from others, He reminded me that I am not forgotten, I am precious to Him, He sees me, and He has a plan for my life.

The weeks following their wedding offered me great opportunity for reflection; I had seen the tremendous goodness of God and how He had provided for me in a time of need. In mid-January I was reading St. John of the Cross' *Living Flame of Love*. The saint wrote that once the soul is united with God in such a way, it becomes so "sublimely possessed by Him" and becomes beautifully conformed to His will. I was brought to tears suddenly when reading those words; I prayed with an intensity and intention unlike ever before. I pleaded with God, 'Jesus, nothing else matters, my soul will never be satisfied until I'm perfectly united with You.'

And then the Holy Spirit prompted me: if that really is the case, then I needed to be willing to do *whatever* God asked of me, regardless of what that was. Being open to His will meant being open to religious life.

Religious life? That thought terrified me, I haven't seriously contemplated religious life in years. I had been so fixated on marriage that I really hadn't given a thought to anything else. Even though that thought was so overwhelming, the Holy Spirit filled me with peace, and I decided that I should ponder what He had revealed in my heart, like Mary had done. Slowly but surely, the



Meredith says goodbye to nursing

Lord expanded my heart, and allowed me to once again become open to the idea of a religious life. Jesus continued to speak to my heart in the following weeks orchestrating so many things during that time. He spoke to me through other people, reminding me that I am meant for something special. Could that be religious life, I wondered? I was talking to a friend and colleague at the hospital several weeks later, and I shared what God was doing in my life. I explained that the Lord had placed the idea of religious life on my heart, and that I was scared. I blurted out reasons as to why I couldn't pursue such a life. She rebutted by saying that it sounded like I was making up excuses, and that deeply convicted me.

That same day I went to Church and knelt in front of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, crying, telling Him that I was scared and needed clarity. Jesus so beautifully spoke to my heart, "It's always been Me; you couldn't love anyone else for your whole life." I felt an unexplainable peace. Jesus reminded me over and over in prayer that I can trust Him and that He's unlike any other man. In an instant, all my past failed relationships made sense: I used to think that something was intrinsically wrong with me, but He changed my perspective. He made me realize that He was saving me for Himself. I felt relief that God finally had revealed His will to me, but I asked Him, "Why did this take so long?" I will turn 30 this year. Jesus reminded me, "How old was I when I started My public ministry?" Could it be that Jesus was allowing my life to reflect His in this little way?

The months that followed were a whirlwind. In March, Coronavirus had caused a massive shutdown: quarantine was in full effect. In the midst of a fear-inducing time, Jesus allowed me to experience a peace deeper than I have ever felt. So many people were experiencing paralyzing fear, anxiety, isolation, and despair. Miraculously, I felt peaceful, hopeful, loved, and delighted in. I viewed the time of quarantine as quite a gift: I was able to discern my vocation with Jesus, free from a million opinions of those around me. So often we get fixated on others, and we have many different influences. We can easily become distracted and derailed and forget to pay attention to the person who has the

most important opinion: God. As challenging as the time of quarantine has been, it provided me with a retreat away from the world so that I could hear Jesus. During those months, I treasured our time together because life's many distractions were diminished.

It was beautiful to see how Jesus held my hand and walked beside me during such a stressful time that should have led me to anxiety.

Quarantine forced me to sit by myself and encounter Jesus alone. It was beautiful to have my time to listen to Him, to keep asking for clarity in my vocation during my prayer time. I was surprised by what God had placed on my heart, but that's part of the beauty of a life with Christ; it is a crazy adventure that will take you to places that you didn't foresee as a possibility. It was beautiful to see how Jesus held my hand and walked beside me during such a stressful

I've been given incredible clarity.

It's been a gift to entrust my life completely to Him. I have resigned from my nursing job at the hospital, given up my worldly possessions. I entered postulancy with the Servants of the Lord and the Virgin of Matará in August of 2020. They are a missionary order of Sisters who seek to evangelize the culture through both active and contemplative branches. They are the female branch of the religious family of the Incarnate Word, founded in Argentina. I never would have thought that this would have been Jesus' plan for my life, but He knows my heart better than anyone and has shown me that He can bring peace and clarity, even in the midst of a traumatic time. I am so excited to continue to discern a life as a bride of Christ. I pray that He may use my life to bring the joy and love of Christ to others; He lovingly and gently encounters us in our weakness and brokenness. When things seem dark and impossible, He can bring good out of everything, and He can shift



Mom, Claire and Grandma's Visit

time that should have led me to anxiety. Instead, I found that the Good Shepherd Himself was leading me through the storm, assuring me each step of the way. He's reminded me over and over that He held me in the palm of His hand. Jesus and Mary have led me so gently and beautifully, and

our mindsets to something beautiful, He truly has the best things in store for us! Be open to what He has for your life, ask Him to increase your trust in Him. He will always choose the best for you, if you leave the choice up to Him.



Meredith submitted this article shortly before joining the religious life. She entered postulancy with the Servants of the Lord and the Virgin of Matará in August of 2020.



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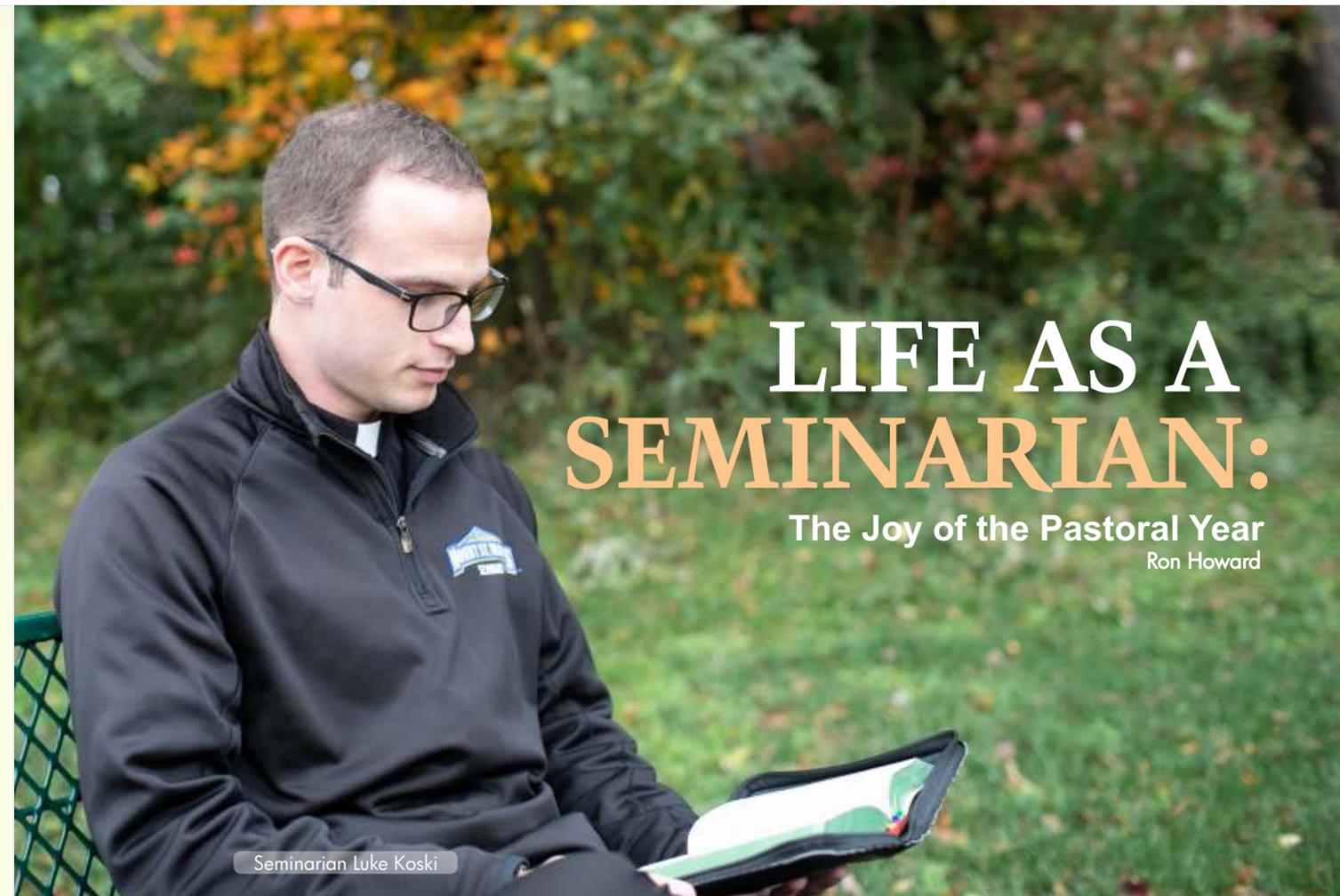
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Seminarian Luke Koski

# LIFE AS A SEMINARIAN:

The Joy of the Pastoral Year  
 Ron Howard

The human dimension of formation looks at certain skills and habits, such as creating and keeping a clean environment, organization of time and things, health and exercise, and even things such as how to change a tire, or how to conduct oneself in different social settings, or creating hobbies like reading books or playing a game of chess. The Spiritual dimension looks at prayer habits, and how to grow in prayer. Examples are to build the habit of praying the Liturgy of the Hours, daily Rosary, daily Holy Hour, and to build relationships with the saints. The Intellectual dimension looks at the knowledge needed as a foundation and habits necessary to continue to learn and teach the Faith to others. For instance, learning about the history of the church, how the church administers the sacraments, the documents and resources the church has, and scripture study. Lastly, the Pastoral dimension looks at the seminarian's strengths and weaknesses in various ministries. The seminarian learns to minister to the sick or the elderly, or teach RCIA, sacramental preparation, or Religious Education. This all takes place to help the seminarian become a priest who will effectively serve Jesus Christ's bride, the Church.

Priestly formation happens both formally in the seminary, and in a parish setting. In my case, I have been in seminary for five

years and in the parish since March 2020. I was a mechanic for a few years before joining seminary so, pardon my analogy, but seminary is like a store where you can purchase tools and learn how to use them, where the parish rectory is like taking those tools to a job and using them the best you can. I think of how many times I went to a store (or truck) to purchase a tool and they have demos set up so you can do "this or that" with the tool. Then when you take it to the job, it is never as clean, never as simple, and only applicable in certain situations. So, now you have this new fancy tool that can do "this or that" but you can't use it like you could on the demo. The seminary has given me tools to use and has even instructed or taught me on how to use these tools, but in the parish I have to learn how to use these tools in practice. For my pastoral year, I serve alongside the pastor, learning to use the tools and to see what tools I still need to acquire.

There are three main changes from the seminary to the parish. The first is being in the community. In the seminary where I study, there are over one hundred seminarians living and striving together after the same goal. Whereas in the rectory, I am the only seminarian among the priests I live with.



Seminarian Ron Howard

is absent. I am not running into other seminarians on a regular basis, but I do keep in touch with some who are close friends. I am spending most of my time with priests and building relationships with them. To grow in friendship and community with my brother seminarians was and is

prayer?" This has allowed me to more deeply engage with prayer and seriously consider what I want my prayer life to look like so that I am effective in my ministry. The community I live with has shifted since moving to the rectory, but it has only intensified my desire to be among priests and deepened my desire for prayer.

**Focus.** This change is the most natural. In the seminary we focus on our studies and our habits/virtues. We develop a strong foundation so that we can go out to the Faithful and minister to them properly and effectively. This is a necessary stage in priestly formation, but it is just one stage we go through. In the seminary we are preparing ourselves to be effective servants in theory. In the parish, we are serving the people of God in practice. We have time to minister and serve.

**Relationship with the priest.** In the seminary we go to class, take notes and listen to lectures, talks and presentations. In the parish, just as the disciples literally followed in the footsteps of Christ, I literally follow my pastor and observe how to be pastoral. This is like an apprenticeship beyond the classroom. There is no better way to learn than to have a mentor; it just doesn't compare to reading a book or listening to a lecture. I am blessed with the opportunity to walk with my pastor, a true servant of Christ, and learn from his example first hand.

These times are hard in unique ways, but no change will stop Jesus Christ from walking with me to help me grow into the man and priest He is calling me to be. No matter what challenges I face during formation, all things are possible with Christ. How blessed I am to live in the rectory with those who are In Persona Christi, who are In the Person of Christ. This is the joy of my pastoral year.

fantastic. And yet, there is something awesome about growing in fraternity with the priest in the rectory. There is a special fraternity among those who will 'one day be priests,' and a special relationship with those who already are priests! It's the beginning of the fraternity I desire to join one day.

**These times are hard in unique ways, but no change will stop Jesus Christ from walking with me to help me grow into the man and priest He is calling me to be.**

**Spiritually.** We are all connected within the Mass and prayer, but I am no longer praying morning and evening prayer with 100 other men. In the rectory, I pray with a much smaller group. This makes prayer focused and more intentional. We pray Evening Prayer together, but the rest of daily prayer is my own responsibility. This has made prayer much more intentional and has made me question "Why am I praying," and "How important is my

Ron Howard is a seminarian for the Archdiocese of Baltimore in Maryland. Currently serving his Pastoral year of formation at St. Mark's Parish in Fallston, he graduated from Catholic University of America with a Pontifical Bachelor's degree in Philosophy. Presently, Ron is pursuing a Degree in Theology with a concentration in Systematic Theology from Mount St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore.



The second change is the focus. In the seminary it is about studying, growing, and developing, whereas in the rectory the focus is on ministry and serving the parish needs. Not that these two are separated from each other, but it is a change that any good seminarian should look forward to. The third change is the relationship with the priest. In both seminary and in the parish, they are role models, but in terms of teaching, it looks quite different.

**Community.** In seminary we are a community of over one hundred seminarians studying to be priests, with priests on faculty helping to guide us and teaching us many subjects in a classroom setting. In seminary, we are full-time students studying the different aspects of faith and theology throughout the academic year. Every day we have Morning Prayer, Mass, and Evening Prayer as a community. We eat meals together and have different activities that revolve around student relations, seminarian fraternity building, and ministry. In seminary we work together to complete our studies and push each other to form habits that allow us to be effective in the parish.

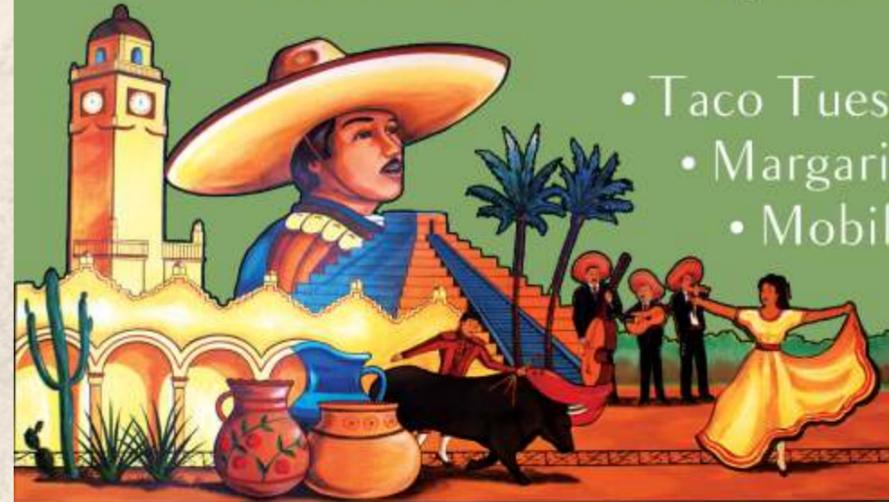
In the rectory, I am the only seminarian, so the fraternal aspect with other seminarians

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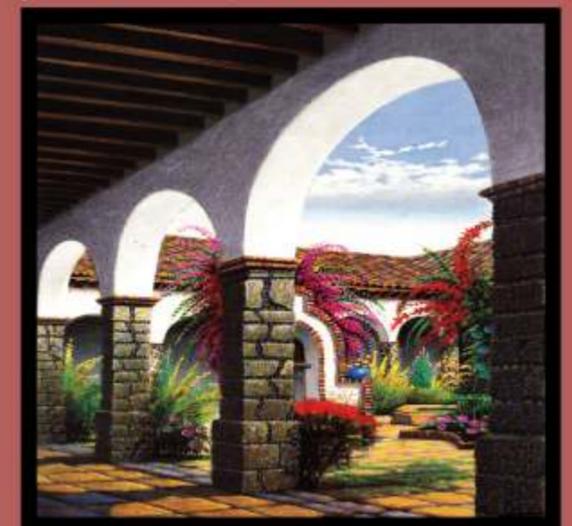
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EVANGELIZATION



# FAITH IS ABOUT PRESENCE

Fr. Austin Murphy

On the evening of Saturday, March 14, I posted a note on the doors of our church, informing people, "Masses are canceled until further notice; however, the church will remain open for personal prayer." At that time, I thought that after a couple of weeks things would return to normal. Eventually, even being open for personal prayer was eliminated, and our doors remained locked. As a priest and as a pastor, I was depressed. I wondered how long this problem would last and how we would be able to "do church" without being able to come together as we so often did. I had no idea that this would be our reality for three months (and it remains very strange to this day!).

community. We began to stream our Masses live onto Facebook via our cell phones, and parishioners were once again able to "see Mass" even if they couldn't actually be there. We learned what "spiritual Communion" was, and we prayed for it at each Mass. We transformed an unused room in the rectory into a small chapel and streamed daily Mass from there every morning.

*I watched humbly as parishioners cried softly as they received Communion for the first time in three months.*

Time wore on. Kids learned at home; parents teleworked as best as they could; restaurants sold take-out; and you could buy mixed drinks to go. Our world began to adapt to the remote reality that the coronavirus imposed upon us all. In the rectory, Fr. Vin, Fr. Diego, and I welcomed our parish's seminarian, Ron, to our little

We all seemed to adapt to this "new normal," as we called it. However, there was always an ache in my heart – as I am sure it was in many of the hearts of our faithful. I missed my people. I missed seeing them; I missed praying with them; I missed pretending to hate their hugs! Our brothers

and sisters also missed the Eucharist. Seeing Mass on TV or on a computer screen is nice, but it is a sad substitute for being there; and our faith – our Lord – is all about being there!

So, on June 14 – the Feast of Corpus Christi – three months to the day from that evening when I posted the closure notice – we gathered again on our parking lot for our first public Mass together. It was a joyous occasion, and everyone commented not only how good it was to be back, but how "cool" it was to have "drive-in Mass." That little innovation brought such happiness to over 300 people that day. Now, even as we struggle to adhere to safety guidelines, we are happy to be back in church – even if it is limited – and we continue to pray for an end to the pandemic and a safe reemergence into what we used to know. It's easy to see this period of time as a sort of "Babylonian exile" to be endured until we can get back to normal. However, I think that would be a mistake for us. During these months of coronavirus, I have seen many

blessings and insights emerge that can help to enhance our mission of bringing an encounter with Jesus to our parishioners and our neighbors. Perhaps it is helpful to name them.

First, we stepped into a world of technology that many of us did not know before. The capability to live-stream Mass and other activities has proven not only to be a stop-gap solution to limited access to church, but it is also a wonderful means of evangelization. People who would be hesitant to step through our doors can view what we do safely from their couch in the pajamas, and they can see that our worship might not be all that different from others. The ability to share our faith experiences on Facebook and other social platforms is a huge blessing to our church.

Second, our parishioners really began to tune themselves to the needs of others. Families were forced to take up their role as the "domestic church," as mothers and fathers were called upon to make their homes places of prayer and growth in the Holy Spirit. Through resources that we were able to provide, our families were able to participate more deeply in the experience of Holy Week. The pace of life slowed, and we found time for family meals, reading, and prayer. Many of our parishioners took up the responsibility of calling and checking on our older members to help them feel less lonely and to provide for their needs. Different parish groups organized food distributions, and we gave out more than 1,500 packages of groceries to needy neighbors.

Finally, I think we came to a new appreciation of "being there." Spiritual Communion and Mass online are wonderful things to appreciate and promote, but they are no match for a real encounter with Jesus. The longing, the hunger for the Eucharist grew in us, and people who didn't even realize it missed holding Jesus in their hands and receiving Him into their hearts. Sure, "church is wherever God's people are gathered," and "Jesus is everywhere," but I think we really understand that in the Sacraments we are given a privileged encounter with the real Lord



Priests and deacons prostrate before the altar on Good Friday.

who makes Himself available to us. I watched humbly as parishioners cried softly as they received Communion for the first time in three months.

All of these things I count as blessings in a time of the pandemic. They are part of our lives now, and they should continue for the rest of our lives. As a parish, we should adapt to ministry in an increasingly digital world. We ought to be attentive to the important role of the family in promoting and teaching our faith. We must be aware of the needs of the vulnerable around us: the poor, the sick, the elderly. And we cannot take for granted the real encounter with Jesus that we are blessed to have in the Sacraments and the liturgical life of the Church.

Being there is what our Church is all about – whether that's on someone's Facebook feed, at your dining room table, in your love for an elderly neighbor, or in the reception of Holy Communion. Our faith is about presence – *real presence* – and there is no substitute for that!



*Fr. Austin was born and raised in Baltimore, growing up in Catonsville - the oldest of four. After high school at Mt. St. Joseph, he attended UMBC, and eventually responded to God's call to priesthood. He studied philosophy at St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore before heading to Rome to study theology at the North American College. He was ordained a priest in 2003 and has worked as an associate pastor, college chaplain, vocations director, and pastor. Fr. Austin has been pastor at Christ the King in Glen Burnie since July, 2019.*



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# THE AMAZING JOY OF GIVING

Fr. Sylvanus Onyejiuwa



Beneficiaries of the walk organized by the Family Apostolate to support the hungry in Africa

I felt the whole world crumbling down on me on the 24th of October 2019, when I lost my dearest mother to the cold hands of death. Already, before her passing, I was going through a bout of crisis as a result of some difficult experiences in my places of pastoral assignment. I was almost beginning to doubt the authenticity of my calling and my relevance in the ministry as the pastoral events were hindering my capacity to give my mom the necessary help she needed when she fell ill. This lack of attention led to her preventable death. At that point, it was as if I was buffeted by a storm.

As I was managing to recover from the traumatic shock after her burial, I found myself unexpectedly submerged into yet another crisis, the crisis of the covid-19 pandemic and its concomitant, unprecedented lockdown – a situation that was infamously exacerbated by the media charade. Things became much more

difficult, as I grappled with the challenge of taking care of my ailing, aged father who could no longer freely access medical care as a result of the lockdown.

Here in Nigeria, the deaths caused by coronavirus are minuscule compared to the deaths caused by hunger and other ailments. With the lockdown still in place, people were unable to go out to look for their daily bread, and there was no tangible effort on the part of the government to evenly distribute goods in order to cushion the effect of the lockdown. Gradually people began to die from totally preventable causes.

In my parish, I could feel how empty and hollow my homilies were becoming to my hunger-stricken parishioners, many of whom had already lost their loved ones in the wake of the lockdown. It became very clear to me how irrelevant our words in the pulpit can become in the face of tragic

situations that require physical assistance.

It is no wonder why Christ insisted that the disciples should give the crowd something to eat when they suggested that the people be sent away to get food for themselves (Mt. 14:15-16). Not just in that incident, but evidence abounds in the Gospels that Christ, in his public ministry, does not separate the spiritual wellbeing of his audience from the physical. He requires his priests to follow his examples in our own ministries. It is, therefore, quite disheartening for a priest to find himself unable to do anything to better the deplorable condition of his crestfallen flock in a situation like the covid-19 pandemic.

I was in this state of despondency when I got this unexpected call from Fr. Vincent Arisukwu, asking me to help *The Family Apostolate, Inc.*, reach out to many needy families in this part of the world. Initially, I didn't understand what he meant, so he

went further to tell me that *The Family Apostolate, Inc.*, decided to organize a Walk for the hungry in Africa in order to help mitigate the effect of the global pandemic on the body of Christ in Africa, and that what I was being required to do was as a result of the success of that walk. I jumped up in excitement at the prospect of being able to physically help local parishioners.

Having made all the purchases worth over 2.5m naira (about \$6,500) and all the necessary arrangements with the pastors of the various parishes I was to visit, Fr. Vin asked me to employ the assistance of my very close friend and brother priest, Rev. Fr. Augustine Bekee, who was very enthusiastic to be able to help. Without much delay, we embarked on the extraordinary missionary journey.

The first parish we visited was St. John Bosco's Parish, Owuamakohia, in Ikeduru Local Government Area (LGA) of Imo State, Nigeria, in West Africa. Before we had even gotten there, the people were already seated, waiting patiently for our arrival. After offloading the food items, we took some group photographs with the beaming faces of the beneficiaries and their pastor, Fr. Cornelius Ajaegbu, who then proceeded to thank the members of *The Family Apostolate, Inc.*, and to pray over the goods to be distributed.

While we were still there, reveling in their joy as the sharing was going on, Fr. Bekee whispered to me how fascinated he was and how beautiful it was to see people's sorrow transformed to joy by just a little gesture of love. I replied that it is the magical power of the Gospel, that we belong to a Eucharistic family that cuts across every nation. That is the only thing that makes this kind of gesture possible in a time like this.

Boosted by the exhilarating experience of the first day, we embarked on the second 'missionary journey.' The destination was St. Peter Claver Parish, Ihitte Okwe, in Ngor Okpala L.G.A. Imo State. By the time we got to the parish, the beneficiaries were already settled in the church, singing and praising God, even without seeing any of the food and supplies yet. It was really touching. Fr.

Felix Okere, the parish priest, came out to welcome us. He thanked us for arriving on time and expressed his happiness that his parish was among the few parishes chosen



FA Team in Nigeria delivering food donation to a parish

for the donations. After prayers and a few photographs, the items were distributed amidst rejoicings, and we all departed happier than we were the first day.

As days went by, I began to notice something beautifully different in my life. The pains in my heart began to ebb away, I began to sleep better, and my entire outlook lifted. It was as if I was offered the

“... in the final analysis, it was my life that was greatly touched.”

opportunity to reverse the events in my life that contributed to the pains in my heart. It was the amazing joy of giving, the joy that has the power to heal the wound caused by the death of a loved one. St. Paul was absolutely right when he recalled the words of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Acts of the Apostles that: “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35).

In the early hours of the morning of the third day, Fr. Innocent Nwankwo, the parish priest of St. Lazarus' Catholic Parish Ofekata Orod, in Mbaitoli L.G.A. Imo State, called to inquire if we were still visiting his parish. It started raining heavily with no sign of letting up. As we got on the road, the food vehicle had a flat tire, and it



Fr. Sylvanus Onyejiuwa is a priest from Umuokiri Umuonimo in Ehime Mbano L.G.A., Imo State, Nigeria. He studied Philosophy and Theology at Seat of Wisdom Major Seminary Owerri, Imo State, and he is currently serving as associate pastor at Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish, Orji in Owerri.

was very difficult for us to get a 'vulcanizer' to fix the tire under that rain. We spent hours under the rain fixing the car still unperturbed. The thought of putting a smile on some faces kept us calm. It felt like a real missionary experience.

We got to the parish by noon. The parish priest welcomed us and expressed their excitement at the news of our visit. He thanked the members of Family Apostolate, Inc., for their love and concern for the poor people of Africa. It was delightful to share the great moment with the recipients at this parish.

With such overflowing joy, I traveled back home to share the donated items with my parishioners. I hadn't disclosed to the prospective beneficiaries the reason for inviting them, which made the experience more fascinating. Their excitement was indescribable.

This is what ought to be in the kingdom Christ came to establish: caring and loving without limits, giving without strings attached. According to Mother Teresa, “Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love.” Even though the world appears to have been overtaken by evil, there are still people like the members of Family Apostolate, Inc., who are capable of enduring goodness, doing small things with great love as Christ would want us to do. It is a visible sign that the Kingdom is on the way.

I wish to express my deepest gratitude to Fr. Vincent Arisukwu and the members of Family Apostolate, for providing me and my brother priest, Fr. Augustine Bekee, this wonderful opportunity to touch people's lives. We felt God using us to answer the prayers of his people. It is true that through your donations, we went about touching people's lives, but in the final analysis it was my life that was greatly touched, for the joy I felt impacting people's lives healed the pains and the wounds in my heart.



# COVID-19

## the musings of a parish priest

Fr. Vincent Arisukwu

The magnitude of the impending crisis caused by COVID-19 was not clear to me in the beginning. Travelling to Atlanta for a conference in early March, I began hearing buzzwords in the media like corona virus, Wuhan China, and lockdown. Paying little attention, I enjoyed the CAPS (Christian Association for Psychological Studies) conference in Georgia with its flurry of talks, discussions, and breakout sessions; socialization was quite normal. The strangeness began upon my return just a few days later and was happening so fast. Seeking to grasp the meaning of the unfolding reality at the time was like a scene from Hitchcock's Cary Grant, searching for a man who never existed in the movie North by Northwest. The normally bustling airport was cold and deserted. Flight attendants on the Delta airline were reserved and cautious about following the new "guidelines." The pilot's instructions were strange and unfamiliar. The 90-minute flight home was turbulent but not because of the weather. Pensively, each time I looked out the window, it felt like the world was experiencing the presence of an angel of death, stealthily on the move.

Churches would remain open for private prayer, but no liturgical activities would be allowed. A short time later, private prayer in the church was taken away too. Priests were to celebrate masses in empty churches. The idea of live-streaming masses and having the faithful join virtually was borne. The Eucharistic community would participate through what is called spiritual communion and the Sunday obligation to attend mass was lifted.

Everything was different. The Orwellian strangeness of this time caused a lot of anxiety and frustration for both the clergy and laity alike. Parishioners bombarded us with questions about the virus and about the idea of locking the churches. Some felt it was a safe decision while others felt betrayed. Some thought that the church should be a refuge for those who were afraid by the situation. They argued that Christ would have kept the doors open for his flock. As a parish priest, it was hard to

The empty pews were haunting and seemed to be shouting back at me.

reconcile the mixed feelings and the mixed messages coming from the church authorities at the time. Personally, it was a hard pill for me to swallow. I come from a culture that never locks the church for any reason. I come from a background that seeks solutions from God rather than run away from Him. At the same time, I was shocked at the intimidating news updates and the data released by the media. The

governor's press conferences showed a constant rise in the cases recorded in Maryland. I felt sad, as if a veil was covering my face, suffocating me.

While the churches and most businesses closed, the grocery shopping madness began. I remember driving to four different shops without finding a case of water to buy. Luckily, a friend gave me a case until supplies restocked. The shelves were emptied of food in the mad rush. People stood in line for hours to shop, stock piling supplies as if the world were ending. Meats, rice and canned goods flew off the shelves. There was no toilet paper, paper towels or cleaning supplies. Hand gloves were twice as costly. Emotionally, this created a heightened sense of fear. Suddenly, people became suspicious of their neighbors. Masks, social distancing, then the concept of A-symptomatic COVID patients only added to the stressful air of suspicion. Although the CDC put out the known symptoms of COVID, the idea of potentially testing positive without exhibiting those symptoms created further alarm. The mentality was, "If I come close to you, I might die. If I breathe your air, I might suffocate. If I look you in the eye, I might get infected." Then, the elderly population was presented as about to be wiped out. They were asked to remain in their homes because they were considered "high risk."

We were in lockdown. Since the virus had been described as a global pandemic, the entire world experienced the lockdown. It didn't matter the gravity of the spread in different parts of the world, what mattered

was that COVID was an airborne disease and reportedly more contagious than any known disease. I remember speaking with a friend who made a joke with the craziness saying, "I'll prefer to test HIV positive at this time than COVID positive." This showed the level of stress which individuals were struggling with.

Celebrating Mass in an empty church marked off with tape, barricaded with stop signs and non-entry markers, was the strangest thing that has happened to me as a priest. At first, I couldn't make meaning out of what I was doing. The empty pews were haunting and seemed to be shouting back at me. The sound system echoing off the vacant church walls was unnerving. Preaching to a cell phone camera felt like an actor on an empty theater stage. The weather was cold, reflecting the feelings of coldness in my heart. The days seemed the same, one blending into the next. The season in the liturgical calendar made it even more difficult. Palm Sunday came on April 25. We missed the congregation in an inestimable way. Everything fell within the Holy Week and Easter period, so, Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday were all celebrated in an empty church. We felt the impact of the absence of our people: the choir, altar servers, ushers, extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist, the lectors. We missed having sacristans prepare the altar for Mass. We missed the smiles of

parishioners walking into the church with their hugs and handshakes. It was not the same.

The questions from the parishioners wouldn't stop coming. In the middle of May, I had a call from a desperate parishioner who just needed to talk. I offered to meet with her with clear boundaries to keep the 6 foot social distancing. We met at the parking lot of Slade School, a very big space with each of us talking from inside our cars. This woman cried so hard that she had missed receiving the Blessed Eucharist. That encounter filled me with tears.

However, COVID situation challenged us differently. At the parish, we started exploring new pastoral strategies to feed our people. Fr. Austin, Fr. Diego, and I began drive-through confessions at the parking lot of the church. Even though it was freezing cold outside, we felt happy doing it. It felt warmer than the empty church. Those who came for the confessions were happy too. We started in chairs then moved to our respective cars, administering absolution. It was emotional in the sense that penitents expressed how satisfying it was to come to church, albeit in the parking lot. We also rediscovered our friendships as brother priests at the rectory. We celebrated in the chapel set up by the seminarian inside the rectory. We had

more time for breakfast and spent time sharing social, cultural, and theological conversations. We started getting used to the new normal, the new method of being priests in the glare of COVID.

In addition to the spiritual stress of COVID, another consequence of the lockdown was an economic downturn. While the developed countries had plans to take care of their citizens, the developing nations could not handle the pressure. Africa, for example, had no plan B. The citizens were forcefully locked in; no stimulus package, no unemployment benefits, and no strategy to cushion the effects of hunger which would become more destructive than COVID. In June, we embarked on a Walk to support some of our African brothers and sisters. (read story in this issue)

As of this writing, it's been nine months since COVID started (February – November) and we take stock of its toll. There have been lives lost and many businesses have shuttered permanently. Education had taken on a different dimension with online classes and schooling from home. Socialization is quite different now; no hugs, no warm exchange of greetings. Although churches have opened, it's not the same. Church attendants have their faces covered with masks and are not allowed to sing. There is no kiss of peace. So much has changed. The world has experienced trauma: pandemic, protests, closures, elections, and other socio-economic upheavals.

On the other hand, these experiences have ushered in blessings too. Parents are more involved in the education of their children. We've made time for friendships and increased family connections. We've learned lessons in patience and how to press pause, slowing down our pace. Importantly, it seems like the hand of Divine Providence is making His presence known throughout the world. Think about how many plans you made prior to COVID. How much of them did you accomplish? And honestly, how important were they? We have all been forced to rethink our attitude towards controlling the things around us. The COVID situation reechoes the Psalm, "The Lord's is the earth and its fullness, the world and all its peoples" (24:1).

.....continued on page 17



Fr. Austin Murphy & Fr. Vin at drive-through confessions

# It helps to listen, GOD SPEAKS in the silence

(about the Walk for the Hungry in Africa)

Patti Rubin



Leaning against the vestment cabinet, he intently scrolled through his phone after concluding Thursday's adoration. I paused in my sacristan duties but he was a million miles away. "There's so many," he muttered. "So many what?" I asked. "So many people back home who need help. I've sent them all the money I have." Looking back at his phone he sighed, "What's a poor priest to do?" I studied the face of my great friend. "You look tired, Fr. Vin," I remarked. He kept scrolling, brows furrowed. "Listen to this," he said and then launched into reading one heartbreaking message after another, appeals and cries for help coming from his homeland in Nigeria, a country over 6,000 miles away. Throwing his hands up, "What can we possibly do to impact a situation like this? I feel so helpless. Sometimes it helps just to talk to someone, you know? It can help when someone listens."

COVID-19 hit the planet like a tsunami. Its waves overwhelmed and reverberated to every corner of the world. Countries were hit in different ways, some had high death tolls while others suffered economic woes. Africa, however, was a different story. In my mind, it was always the powder keg. COVID case numbers were nominal there, but the virus was never their real problem. In Africa, there are no economic safety nets, no stimulus checks or unemployment benefits, no soup kitchens or rental assistance programs. Government-

imposed lockdowns can have catastrophic ramifications for the people due to poor government oversight and corruption. In Africa, if you don't work, you don't eat. Honestly, my fear for Africa from the beginning of COVID was the very real possibility of a government-imposed famine. It would be created through saving them from COVID by starving them to death. This was early May, and the situation was taking an ominous turn.

While Fr. Vin poured out his story, I began thinking about a Maryland priest in a neighboring diocese who organized a walk for the hungry in the earliest days of COVID with great success. He walked from his parish to a Marian shrine, some 60 miles (96 km) away to raise money for those affected by COVID and the lockdowns. Explaining to Fr. Vin all the funds that were raised for those in need by this walk, I saw the glimmer of excitement in his eyes. Chuckling inside, I knew it was a done deal. "Let's put a group together," he said with glee. "We can do this! We can walk and raise funds to help the people in Africa. I'll call a Zoom meeting. We can have..." Yes, that's how The Family Apostolate rolls.

The coming weeks were a whirlwind of meetings, strategizing, and activity. Rather than one long walk, it was decided that we would embark on two separate, one-day events. People would donate money to support the needy through the walking efforts of the events. It was also decided that

the walks would focus on the intercession of our Blessed Mother, who stepped in to say to her Son, "they have no wine." The first Walk for the Hungry in Africa was a 15-mile trek (24 km) from Christ the King Church in Glen Burnie to the historic St. Mary's Church in Annapolis. St. Mary's was the first Catholic church built in America. The second walk was to be one week later to The Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in Baltimore, America's first basilica. Our walk for the hungry was beginning to take shape! The flyer was drafted, and we began our publicity blitz to raise awareness and funds. We formed volunteer teams and told anyone and everyone who would listen to spread the word. The teams worked with a spirit of charity, and with the belief that our efforts would result in food on someone's table, access to medical care, or the rent being paid.

But nothing in life worth having comes easily, and that proved to be true in our adventure. There were bumps along the way. Our graphic designer, George, graciously put up with us (as he always does!) during our numerous edits to the flyer announcement. Steve, our webmaster at the time, worked hard to get the events and donation page of our website up and running amidst numerous technical problems. We trained for the long walk to Annapolis. Fr. Vin did an 8-mile trial walk but in bad shoes, and his feet swelled up so

much that he could barely walk for days. We were working under the legal confines, frustrations, and frayed nerves of a lockdown. The national news was stressful and inconsistent. The churches were closed. Then, like lighting a fuse, the U.S. exploded into civil unrest and riots broke out across many American cities. Walking to the Baltimore Basilica became too dangerous. We shifted gears and decided to change the 2nd walk to a prayer walk at the Shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes in Emmitsburg. Rather than a long walk to Baltimore, we would pray, attend Mass, and offer people who are unable to walk long distances the opportunity to participate in a prayer walk at the Shrine. The morning of the prayer walk, I had a serious car accident on the way to the parish. My car was totaled but thankfully, I was physically unharmed. After a frantic call to Fr. Vin, he arrived at the accident scene. Shaking, I told him to go, "The people are waiting at the church. The prayer walk must go as planned." He grabbed the retreat materials from my smashed-up car, and shaking too, made his way through the flashing lights of the police back to his car. Returning to the church, he faithfully, prayerfully, led the people to the Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes.

Looking back, I wouldn't change a thing. The trials and joys deepened my love for God and others. The walk to Annapolis began on a beautiful, sunny day after an early morning Mass. Spiritually armed with a prayer team who remained at the church

praying for the people in Africa and for us on the route, we began our walk. The team who walked with us were so committed, and the relief team that met us along the way were a God-send. They gave up their day to drive to different locations along the walking route. They greeted us at each stop with water, food, and smiles while encouraging and cheering us on. Their encouragement became especially needed as we tired toward the end. It was well into the afternoon by the time we crossed the finish line and we celebrated with high-fives

Sometimes in life we ask for prayers, other times we are called to be the answer to someone else's prayers.

and shouts of joy at St. Mary's Church. It felt like the elation of completing a marathon. A week later, the team that led the prayer walk at the Lourdes grotto really stepped up to help Fr. Vin with logistics. One person grabbed the camera, another distributed water and retreat materials, others led prayers. They prayed from the heart for the people in Africa. The forecast was for rain that day but the Lord delivered another

beautiful, Son-kissed day where everyone felt spiritually fed. And who could forget the financial donors? Some graciously gave much out of their abundance, while others gave their widows mite out of concern for those who had even less. In the end, we raised over \$13,000 dollars.

There were so many people who gave of their time, treasure, and talent with open hearts. This adventure began with a spark of inspiration immediately following Eucharistic Adoration. Of course, the whole thing was God's idea. He was answering prayers. Sometimes in life we ask for prayers, other times we are called to be the answer to someone else's prayers. Many people in Africa prayed to God for help, and the Lord answered by whispering in the ears of people more than 6,000 miles away. We are truly one body in Christ. So, yes Fr. Vin, it's true: it helps when someone listens. One of the lessons I've learned from COVID is to be a little quieter and listen for the voice of God. He speaks in the silence. He has much to say, much for me to do, if only I will listen.



Patti Rubin is a cradle Catholic who lives in Maryland with her family. She is the administrator of the Family Apostolate. Patti writes for the FA magazine



Annapolis Walk Team



Annapolis Relief Team



Emmitsburg Walk Team

**Continued from page 14.**  
 Everything and everyone belong to God. What have we learned? Can we begin to appreciate the value of human life as God's greatest gift? Can we accept that we cannot control the plans of God? Can we grasp that He can bring triumph from tragedy? Didn't the COVID situation force all of us back to our homes? When the shops shuttered and the schools closed, when the stadiums went dark and the movie theatres hushed, when the bells tolled as the church locked its doors, we went home to our families. All that mattered was life. In the end, it was about faith and family, just like it's been since the very beginning. The joy of Easter Sunday comes after the pain of Good Friday. We might emerge from this bruised but will remain unbroken.



Parishioners kneel in prayer outside locked church

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# Finding GOD IN THE STORM

Ruth Popp



Bride and Groom with family members

On that day, as evening drew on, he said to them, "Let us cross to the other side." Leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat just as he was. And other boats were with him. A violent squall came up and waves were breaking over the boat so that it was already filling up. Jesus was in the stern, asleep on a cushion. They woke him and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" He woke up, rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Quiet! Be still!" The wind ceased and there was a great calm. Then he asked them, "Why are you terrified? Do you not yet have faith?" They were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this whom even wind and sea obey?" (Mark 4:35-41)

We, too, are on a journey, but the weather has been pleasant and the sea relatively calm for a long, long time. The greatest turmoil my family has experienced in the recent past has been generated by us from inside the boat. In a family with two fallen parents and five daughters, we rarely lack for drama. But Hurricane Corona took a great turn this year, and everything changed. The pleasant waters we anticipated, instead grew large, cold, and unrecognizable. Bitter winds dashed the fantasy that we are the masters of anything.

Like the disciples crossing the raging Sea of Galilee, the sudden shift in the weather took us by surprise. We may have cried out to question whether Jesus cares. Thus far, He has answered me by using the force of the wind and waves to give wisdom, bring healing, and remind me of His mysterious goodness. The gift of wisdom came in late March, after my youngest daughter was sent home from school for the rest of the semester. Reality hit her. The sweeping closures signaled danger in a way she had never experienced. She asked, "Mom, could we die?" "Yes," I said, "We could die. If we do not die from the virus, we will die from something else, unless Jesus returns before then."

We went on to discuss how this life is a journey home toward heaven. Then, I looked into her eyes and said, "If I get this virus, and I die, God willing, I will be waiting for you on the other side. That is the goal of this entire life: to end up with God – together – forever."

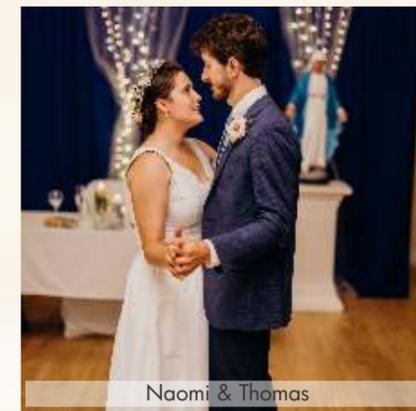
She returned my gaze, was silent for about three seconds, and then stated resolutely, "Okay." Reminding her of our hope for

**In the end, I am seeing the era of this pandemic as a massive time out, a radical reality invasion.**

heaven brought her peace. Though my daughter has heard variations on the theme of that conversation her entire life, these ancient truths had not seemed relevant, until now. The gift of healing came when circumstances related to the virus brought two more daughters back home. My

relationship with one had suffered years ago because I had not responded to her helpfully when she was in great need. I had no idea how to bridge the gap of hurt between us. God knew. He offered us the blessing of time and proximity. I cannot imagine any other circumstances under which I would have had the occasion to welcome her, love her, and deepen the bond of goodwill between us. Simple moments spent preparing meals, playing Boggle, sharing glasses of wine, and talking, helped to weave our hearts closer to one another. The Lord brought us restoration in the midst of turmoil.

The planning and re-planning of my daughter Naomi's, June 20<sup>th</sup> wedding, led to a rediscovery of God's mysterious



Naomi & Thomas

goodness. The first wedding in a family of five daughters is a heavily anticipated event. Rapidly changing circumstances made our efforts to host a gathering feel like a three-month-long game of Twister. The feelings and expectations of seven people were jumbled and dashed, my own included. In mid-April, Naomi and her fiancé had a very helpful discussion about what they considered essential versus non-essential about their wedding.

Their clarity challenged me to let go of my own desires graciously. In my heart, I held to the hope that we could worship, share a meal, and dance in celebration of their wedding. Ultimately, with 20 days to spare, we moved the wedding out of state, and most family members and friends could



*Ruth Popp is a graduate of the United States Naval Academy. She and her husband Tom have five daughters ranging in age from 14 to 28 years old. She has written Bible study materials for women through Walking With Purpose, Inc. A veteran homeschooler of 21 years, she served as the Director and President of the Board of St. Thomas Aquinas Tutorial and the first Director of Development for the CLT, the new standard for college entrance exams. Ruth loves to encounter, write about, and speak about God's patient and personal love.*

not attend. When our third room rental agent canceled our reservations 6 days before the wedding, I finally accepted my own helplessness and remembered the wedding feast of Cana. I turned to the Blessed Mother and said, "Mother, please tell Jesus, 'They have no place to stay.'" (John 2:3) The rental decision was reversed the following day. Our photographer offered to drive 460 miles to do his job. A caterer came out of retirement to provide food. The groom's uncle, a wonderful priest, invited us to his church and provided a team of parishioners to set up, decorate, and clean up! The friends that had become our military family over the years committed to being present wherever, whenever, and for whatever the wedding might be. A young film school graduate even live-streamed the wedding and produced a video of the reception without charge. At some point, it seemed that God was just showing off!

The mad logistics scramble ended in a glorious Mass six states away from home with all immediate family, only one extended family member, and a handful of dear friends present. It looked nothing like our early plans. The wedding was more joyful than my highest hopes for a local wedding. The lasagna was delicious. And we danced. Oh, did we dance! I was reminded that sometimes we have to pry our clenched fist off the nice rock we are holding so that the Lord may place a jewel in our open palm.

In the end, I am seeing the era of this pandemic as a massive time out, a radical reality invasion. It is clear now that this world is not our home. The best-laid plans of men can be crushed by a virus so small we need a microscope to see it. And yet, in the midst of chaos the Lord leads his people forward toward wisdom, unity, and joy. We have re-discovered holy individuals, people of goodwill, loving families, and the community of faith to be a solid refuge. Sounds like God's Kingdom rising. Jesus is in the boat.

## DIVINE PROVIDENCE: The story of Mr. Emmanuel

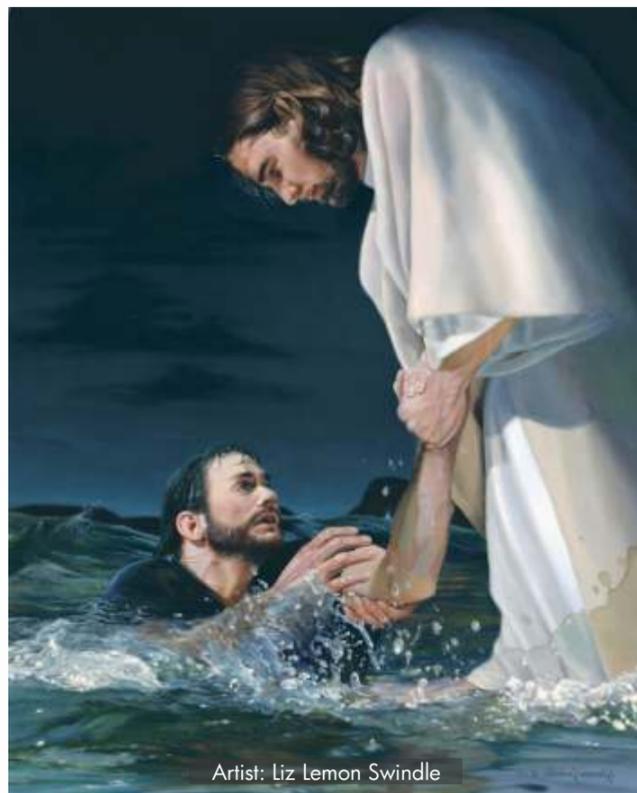
Sister Mary Damian Nwafor,  
Holy Family Sisters of the Needy

This story is about a young man who fled from his country of origin because of a political crisis.

Mr. Emmanuel's only option for survival was to move to the United States to pursue his "American dream," so he immigrated to Ohio. As a devout Catholic, he attended daily Mass and believed that God would help him settle down well. He had many immigration issues to sort out - become a U.S. citizen, find a good job, and get a wife to start a family.

Within four months, he met a woman and they began dating. Time went on, and they got engaged. As the wedding date approached, he transferred to Washington, D.C. for work opportunities, while both continued preparing for the upcoming nuptials. However, two days before the wedding, the young woman abruptly decided that she did not want to get married. Without giving a real reason, she completely cut off the relationship. On top of that, he lost his job. He had no money to pay his house rent, so he became homeless. It seemed that his life was going the way of Job in the scripture. Within twenty-four hours everything he dreamt of crumbled. The young man was terribly sad and desperate. His blood pressure went up, depression and despair set in. He began actively contemplating suicide for a perceived lack of self-worth. He had prayed so hard for God's help, yet he felt abandoned. He was doing his best. He had gone to church every day, prayed his private prayer, and asked the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Rosary every day. He had been nice to people, committed no crime. How could such things be happening? He felt trapped

in a cage. Emmanuel's hope faded away. Then people began to reach out to him. Someone gave him my name so he could receive the professional counseling help that he needed. He came to me and we worked through abandonment, rejection, guilt, and trauma related issues. The reality is that God never left him. As human



Artist: Liz Lemon Swindle

beings, sometimes, someone might be praying for a long time with the feelings that prayers are not heard. Emmanuel couldn't see his prayers making sense anymore. Meanwhile, other friends began making connections to places that might employ him and a possible housing arrangement. Who can know the mind of God? Moment by moment what people were saying to him



*Sr. Damian Nwafor is a Catholic nun from the congregation of the Holy Family Sisters of the Needy (HFSN) founded in Nigeria. She did her first religious profession in 1999 and made her final vows in 2007. She holds a master's degree in clinical psychology and is currently a doctoral student of clinical psychology at the Chicago School of Professional Psychology at Washington, DC campus.*

began to make sense. Love began to open his eyes and heart. One day a friend alerted him to a nearby company that was recruiting skilled workers. He applied for the job but explained to the management his immigration challenges which meant he did not have the proper papers to work. The company agreed to help him regularize his papers and filed work authorization for him.

Emmanuel's case happened at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic caused several problems for individuals and businesses. Many Americans had lost their jobs which made life extraordinarily tough. As an immigrant, he was able to find a job during a very difficult time.

This story teaches us great lessons about life in general and about our human expectations including our response to challenges. This young man prayed, felt that God abandoned him, that his prayer was lost. Yet he eventually found that his prayer was answered, just not in the way that he had thought it would be. God led him to a deeper understanding of the spiritual life. Things do not necessarily come easy. They do not always come the way we plan.

In our lives, the best approach would be to send up our prayers and ask God for what we think is best. We want our way, but God knows better and provides what we truly need. Scripture reminds us, "The hand of the Lord feeds us. He answers all our needs." Ps 145:8-9

## Couples Corner

### Little Intimacies

Fr. Vincent Arisukwu



Photo by J carter from Pexels

There's the old saying that little drops of water make up the ocean. That's the same with building intimacies in marriage and family life. If the drops don't come, the bonds run dry. The greatest bond in the family is certainly the couple's, the love response between husband and wife. This is the anchor for every other relationship in the family. And that's reality. If dad and mom don't relate well, it affects children. If mom and dad are always conflicted, fighting, and shouting at each other, children are negatively impacted. And it usually has a snowball effect on the siblings' bond. That's how dysfunctional families are borne. A calm mom and dad bring serenity to the family.

What are little intimacies? These are love gestures in a relationship. Little intimacies are affectionate responses that build relationships. Between the husband and wife, little intimacies are the communication flows that sustain them in their daily lives. The hugs! The texting! The calls! The hand holding! The smiles! Occasionally checking in on one another during the

day's work makes a difference. On the contrary, failure to keep up with little intimacies can dry up affection. For instance, imagine a week of fighting with your spouse. Be honest about it, how does it feel? Certainly draining! If it happens for two weeks or more it becomes stressful and unbearable.

Often, the therapy and psychology fields emphasize the importance of communication in marriage, something that must be properly understood. We call them "little intimacies" because they are more than speaking or using words to express feelings. Simply being present in the relationship is critical and could be the best form of communication. How does that happen?

Think about your marriage as your flower garden. Having planted the flower, it is necessary to tend it, to water the flower on a daily basis, to check on it, else it dries up and withers. That's what little intimacies do; they water the marriage garden. Little intimacies build up emotional, psychological, physical, and spiritual

aspects of marriage. Try some of these out and see the effect: text your wife good morning daily for one month. Just say, "Good morning darling, how was your night?" Or invite her to hold hands with you as you wake up every morning to say, "Thank you, Jesus" together. That's a big prayer to start your day. Or give her a kiss on the cheek as you wake up.

Whatever you choose to do, maintain it consistently for one month and watch the reaction afterward. The reciprocal response from your spouse will be automatic and nourishing. If you're doing it already, it's usually expected. Your spouse knows it is coming and looks forward to it. If you haven't been doing it, the first reaction will be, hmmm! And a different feeling is elicited going forward. It brings back emotional and spiritual connection. Emotional, because you nourish the desire and the passion for intimacy. Spiritual, because you boost presence. What happens is that you elicit a sense of caring and a feeling of appreciation for your spouse. You're saying to your spouse, "I love you," beyond mere verbal expressions. Your spouse experiences

love in practice. Simple as this seems, it can be hard to practice. But doing it a few times makes it part of your morning.

The lack of or loss of little intimacies in marriage can create an unhealthy distance in the relationship. Sometimes, couples wonder how they became strangers to each other. Yes, I mean strangers. You can stay in your house together yet be strangers. The reason is that little intimacies are neglected and gradually you drift apart. One way to maintain little intimacies is to do it intentionally. Be present when you do it. Offer it because you care. Intentionally shut out other distractions to make your spouse feel special.

Another important factor is to make it fun. Fun is a big part of the relationship because it brings out the best in the other. Everyone wants to see a face that lights up their day. Everyone wants to hear the best words in a text message. Everyone wants to hold the warmest hands. Everyone simply wants to feel love, especially from their beloved. That's the fun.

Again, there is a spiritual presence in each of us, which couples embrace once they come together. Being present means being there in body and soul. That's the meaning of love. When your spouse smiles at you, it brings God, whose image and likeness is

**Being present means being there in body and soul**

represented. God comes in smiles, in happiness, in caring, and in warmth. God is not dry, and that is why dry marital relationships rarely last. God is the warm presence that you share with your spouse. The moment you exchanged vows, you embraced this presence. That moment is when you entered a relationship with God, who is love. For that reason, little intimacies in marriage communicate God. Marriages and relationships that maintain little intimacies not only survive but thrive.



*Fr. Vincent is a priest from Nigeria, currently serving as associate pastor at Christ the King Church in Maryland. Founder of the FA Ministry and FA Magazine, he holds a master's degree in Communication and is presently a doctoral student of Marriage and Family Therapy at Eastern University in Pennsylvania.*

There are no secrets because such couples are communicating. Couples share their fears, anxieties, and hopes when they reach out to each other regularly. They share their vulnerabilities. They feel safe. They support each other. And should one fall, the other builds up in a compassionate way with the understanding that this is what makes us human. The feeling of being judged or condemned is gone.

With the ongoing COVID crisis, this is a great opportunity to discover or rediscover your little intimacies. You need them. Your wife needs them. Your husband needs them. We all do. Little intimacies can be recovered even if it's been gone in your marriage. Just step out and ask for it. Initiate it for your spouse. It can originate from the man or the woman. Take your spouse up on the challenge to do some little intimacies for the next month, and see the blessings this will bring forth.



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# BRIGHT SPOTS IN OUR PRACTICE DURING THE COVID

Njideka Okonjo-Udochi, MD MPH FAAFP



Looking back to the beginning of the pandemic in February of this year, it can be easy to become discouraged. However, I find strength in Isaiah 41:10. Our Almighty God has an answer and a “pick-me-up” for times like this.

A snapshot of how the Coronavirus pandemic started could help to understand the process leading to where we are right now. The pandemic, which began in November 2019 in Wuhan, China, reached the shores of the United States in January 2020 and had its first impact on patients in Washington State. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported the first case of community-spread virus in California on February 26. By March 5, Maryland had reported its first case. This virus was spreading fast. By March 13, SARS-CoV-2 was declared a National Emergency by President Trump and on March 23, Governor Hogan shut the State of Maryland down except for essential services. Everything happened so fast that it

was difficult to keep abreast of everything. Anxiety around the hospital setting was obvious for both patients and staff. As a Board-Certified Family Physician, HIV Specialist, and Geriatrician with 30 years’ experience, serving a unique population of patients, my private practice, staffed with mid-level providers, serve patients who come from 114 different countries – all with their own unique needs and cultural beliefs. I had a strong sense that my practice would be heavily impacted, since my patient population is mainly ethnic and minority patients. Many of them work in essential services and are often the only breadwinner for their families, and they live in multi-generational homes. Many of them travel or have relatives visiting from other countries, so I had to get myself prepared.

I joined a WhatsApp group with fellow physicians to keep abreast with developments across the globe. A good friend in London, a clinical pharmacist, was on the frontlines, being responsible for the entire pharmaceutical response for a 300-

bed hospital heavily impacted by COVID. I reached out to her and tried to learn as much as I could. I followed closely the public health agencies such as the Centers for Disease Prevention and Control and the World Health Organization. By March 23, we had our first case in my practice, a college student who had just returned home to Maryland. My practice switched to a hybrid model (which we still maintain today). It was mostly telemedicine with only select patients seen in the office upon my approval. The parking lot became a triage area for screening and testing patients suspected of COVID-19.

I had made a decision to see all the patients myself, when many of my colleagues were closing their offices. How could I close when this was the time my patients really needed me. However, the challenges were daunting. It was a struggle to find personal protective equipment. Using alternative supply chains, although expensive, allowed us to stock up and purchase what my practice needed. Financially, it was

difficult; I was forced to lay off two-thirds of my staff. Those who remained had to help me design a new protocol of care for patients suspected to have COVID-19, and confirmed cases. I had to develop a partnership with a local lab that had rapid turnaround time for results.

I relied on God's guidance throughout the early days of the pandemic, as my staff and I were able to test hundreds of patients and treat over 100 patients with COVID-19. Although five patients did succumb to the virus, we took solace in knowing that we provided the best care and guidance for the patients and their families during this time. We worked seven days per week, sometimes until 9:00 pm. The work was physically and psychologically draining – we were constantly learning new medical facts. It was tough.

Despite all these challenges, there were bright spots. The lockdowns pushed many

of my families who previously never had time to stay home, together into a "forced vacation." They were able to rest and reconnect with their family members. Many patients also developed increased resiliency to handle challenges. For my part, I had a greater opportunity to reemphasize the importance of preventive care with my patients. I am happy, because through the resources we provided, numerous patients began changing their attitudes about preventive care. Many called to get their medications for chronic diseases, refilled on time and finally asked about screening tests like colonoscopies and mammograms. This was a huge behavioral change geared towards recovery and healing.



*Board-certified in family practice and a fellow of the American Academy of Family Practice, Dr. Udochi is also experienced in HIV and addiction medicine. She received her medical degree from the College of Medicine at the University of Nigeria. She is married and lives in Maryland.*

I am grateful to God that with the help of many, I have been able to bring back all of my staff and to continue providing care to my patients and the community. When I take time to reflect how God brought me through this so far, it shows me how He strengthens and encourages us in times of fear.

With God, all things are possible. Each day, I remember the words of the Scripture, "Don't be afraid, for I am with you. Don't be discouraged, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will hold you up with my victorious hand." (Is. 41:10)

## A Hospital Physician's Perspective: Called To Serve In The Covid Crisis

Michael A. Erdek, M.D., M.A.

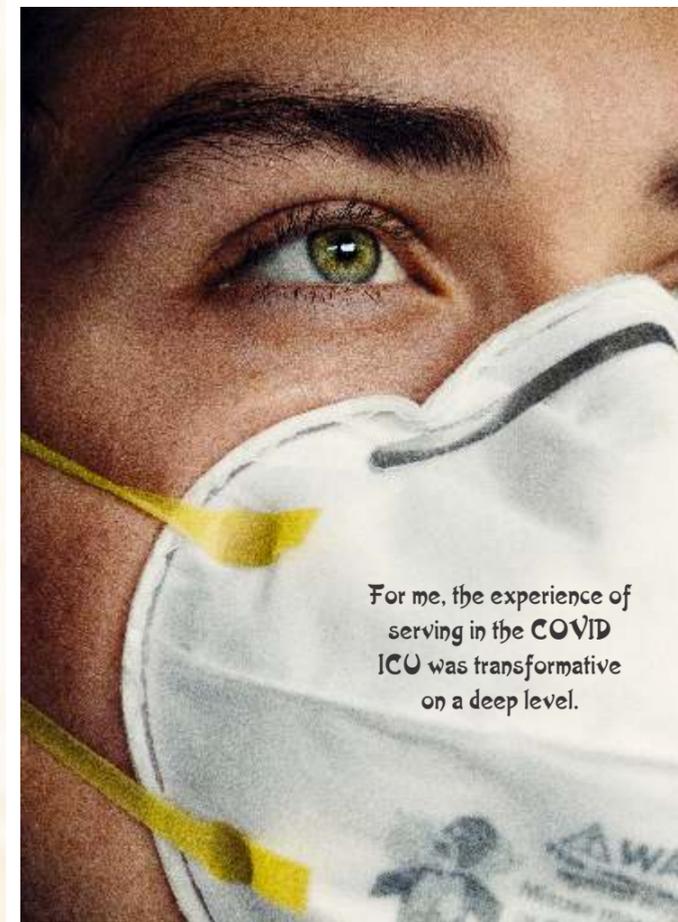
The opportunity to work in the intensive care unit (ICU) during the early height of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020 turned out to be a blessing to me as a physician despite the considerable damage the virus inflicted on many individuals and communities. My usual practice of medicine is in an outpatient clinic. I hadn't worked in an ICU since my fellowship training several years ago; however, like many physicians, nurses, therapists, and support staff, I was called upon to go where the need was greatest. Having had prior critical care training allowed me to be qualified to step up and serve in one of the COVID ICU areas.

The exposure in a pronounced fashion to the effects of the disease on patients, and indirectly on their families, who could not be there to comfort and support their loved ones, was deeply engaging. It required much on the part of me and my colleagues in terms of dedication, resolve, and commitment to serve these very sick and at times lonely patients. Even in the face of these challenges, I found that I was heartened by the camaraderie and sacrifice of those with whom I had the pleasure of serving in this environment. It seemed as if nobody, as subconscious as it may have been, wanted to be outdone in terms of "going the extra mile" during this unprecedented crisis. The pain which the virus was inflicting was evident on the faces of the patients, but also on many of those serving on the front lines of care. Nevertheless, a spirit of professionalism pervaded throughout, and to be immersed in that atmosphere was uplifting in spite of the surrounding circumstances.

For me, the experience of serving in the COVID ICU was transformative on a deep level. Although I had been practicing medicine for over 20 years, much of the orientation and duties that were required to work in the COVID ICU were very much in keeping with what a medical student beginning his or her studies must do in anticipation of one day becoming a physician. In

retrospect, the act of having to refresh my skills, instead of draining me, actually rejuvenated my spirit. There was something so substantive and fundamental in the work that it generated a sort of "rebirth" of my vocation as a physician.

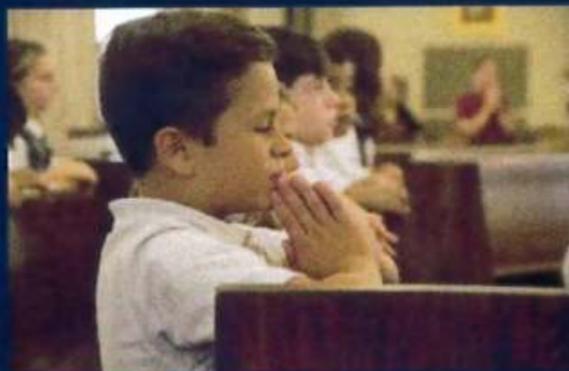
On a spiritual level, the immersion I had in the experience was edifying for the true nature of my faith as a Catholic Christian. I was being called to care for people who were isolated and alone and often near death, yet it provided an opportunity to live out the Gospel as proclaimed in the parable of the Good Samaritan. It helped solidify the lesson that sometimes out of such tragedy and difficulty come the seeds of a deeper, transformative goodness, and of a gift, though born in suffering, which yields greater life and lasting purpose.



*For me, the experience of serving in the COVID ICU was transformative on a deep level.*



*Michael Erdek, MD, MA, is Associate Professor of Anesthesiology and Critical Care Medicine at The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. Dr. Erdek received his undergraduate medical education at the University of Pennsylvania, where he was a Walter Lewis Croll Scholar. He trained in Surgery and in Anesthesiology prior to completing his subspecialty training in Pain Medicine and then Critical Care Medicine at The Johns Hopkins University. Dr. Erdek is a parishioner at Patronage of the Mother of God Byzantine Catholic Church in Arbutus, Maryland.*



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