

Thursday, May 20, 2021

Dear friends,

Happy Easter! I hope that this finds you enjoying this week's sunshine and warm temperatures. It has been a welcome change from the chill & wet of the last few weeks – both the more pleasant weather and the upcoming re-opening of Washington state are welcome signs of hope.

The recent changes by the CDC and the state of Washington

Last Sunday I spoke to you about the new, more flexible mask guidance from the CDC and the expanded options made available by our state government. In particular, I shared that we would consider if and how we might take advantage of the opportunity for those who were fully vaccinated to participate in gatherings without the requirement to wear masks. I also expressed my anxiety that this might become a source of resentment, division, and judgment in our community. I invited you all to share your perspective so that I could prayerfully consider the matter this week.

Many parishioners took the opportunity after Masses and during this week to share their thoughts and feelings about vaccinations, masks, and the idea of creating sections based on them. To all of you who did so, thank you. Despite this being a sensitive and charged topic, every person who reached out or spoke to me was quite kind even when expressing strong emotions and firm convictions.

And the response was nearly universal: that this is and would be a source of resentment, division, and judgment. After speaking with the staff at our meeting on Wednesday, it was clear to me that the best choice is to maintain the current practice of wearing masks at all Masses.

The archdiocese affirms: we will continue to wear masks

The archdiocese has been weighing this matter as well, and – as it turns out – produced updated guidance late this afternoon. [You can read it by clicking on this sentence or by using the link in the footnote below.](#)¹ If you are interested, you can subscribe to that mailing list, which is open to the public and the source of the same information that we priests get when changes are made and updates are published.

The decision I made about vaccinations, masks, and related sections happens to match the guidance from the archdiocese: **we will not be creating sections and will continue with our current practice of wearing all masks at gatherings.** Please

¹ <https://mailchi.mp/seattlearch.org/prayer-card-about-virus-from-archbishop-1992315?e=0b72984380>

notice that **social distancing requirements are much relaxed**, though we should all be mindful of anyone who desires to maintain that distance. When in doubt, the easiest thing to do is simply to ask, responding accordingly & generously.

Sacrificing for the common good

When I was in grade school, one of our relatives gave us a Nintendo. It was the 1990s, so this was not the latest and greatest system (that was the Super Nintendo, with Super Mario World!), but it was new to us. I remember playing the original Mario, Zelda, Excitebike, Contra, and a slew of other games. I also still remember the famous Konami code that unlocked extra lives and often transformed the ever-frustrating ‘Nintendo hard’ levels into something more enjoyable!

Unfortunately, the Nintendo only had two controllers and there were four of us kids. You can imagine how that went – and it went just as you imagine! Mom & Dad had to practically, sometimes literally, drag us not only away from the game system but from each other as we fought to play as often as we could, to the detriment of our chores and the peace of the family overall.

Dad, however, was a clever man and came up with a scheme that he only confessed in its fullness to us a decade later. Mother’s Day was fast approaching, and he convinced us that it would make Mom extraordinarily happy if we gave up the Nintendo for a set period of time. Eager to please, we did. When that period expired, he asked us to consider doing the same again for Father’s Day. Before we knew it, we had gone a couple months without playing the Nintendo. By that time, we were less attached than ever, and he suggest that maybe we did not need it anymore – would we mind giving it to a family that would really appreciate the opportunity to enjoy it? We agreed, and the source of division left our lives, permanently. We never missed it.

Exposing the fault lines in our community

This last year has demanded – not asked but demanded! – a great many sacrifices from us all. Some we have accepted willingly, even eagerly. Others have weighed heavily on our hearts and inflamed fears, suspicions, and anger towards the state, the Church, and each other. While this is not unique to Saint Mark (talk to any parish!), it has been no less potent for its commonality in its ability to tear us apart.

How many conversations have we heard where judgment of others is easily spoken and repeated? Commentary about the fidelity & charity of fellow Catholics, the intelligence of family, friends, & coworkers, the character of priests, bishops, & even the pope – all rooted in a powerful combination of fear, frustration, doubt, and anger. We have all overheard some of these conversations. . . . sometimes out of our own mouths. Those moments have rarely, if ever, been edifying or uplifting.

A watershed moment

The end of the pandemic is clearly in view, even if still distantly. Despite still being at an elevated level, new cases and hospitalizations continue to decline. At the state and federal level, restrictions are being relaxed as we approach the threshold of ‘herd immunity’ – that percentage when a high enough number of folks are immunized such that a virus is no longer a grave threat even to those not immunized.

While life will return to the normalcy we all long for, we must strive for a greater good: the communion we are called to with each other and with Christ. How awful it would be if life were to resume at the cost of our friendships, our union with one another, and our union with the Church as whole. We could conquer the COVID-19 virus while allowing a more insidious and lasting infection to take root.

This Sunday is Pentecost, where we will celebrate the birthday of the Church – the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles (the first bishops!) and their sending forth to make disciples of the whole world. We are reminded of our reception of the Holy Spirit in the sacraments of baptism and confirmation. Just a few short days later, we will celebrate 15 confirmations with Bishop Elizondo – marking the full initiation of those youth who have been preparing throughout the year.

An opportunity to be transformed

This is the Pentecost invitation of us all: **to take time ask the Holy Spirit to descend on our community.** Not just on the community at large, but on each one of us, on ourselves. We have at times spoken past each other, spoken over each other, and misunderstood – sometimes willfully – each other. If we allow it, the Holy Spirit can and will give us the language & words to hear anew and be heard as we desire.

If we invite in the Holy Spirit – without instructions, agenda, or self-will – we will help effect the communion that Christ so desires for us, that we celebrate at every Mass. Our Sunday celebrations are the foundation of this effort, but we can add our daily intentions and prayers to the work of renewing the bonds of our fellowship and friendship. As we anticipate the ordinary life we have so missed, what better way to enter into Ordinary Time!

Christ will bless our sacrifices and efforts, making them fruitful in ways that we have yet to discover. Let us support and pray for one another. And as always, be assured of my daily prayers for you all.

Sincerely,
Father Jacob Maurer