



Did you know?



Coronavirus: can something good come of it?

The coronavirus has spread to many countries of the world including the United States and Venezuela. As doctors and scientists learn more about the new virus and how to treat those infected, people around the world are taking precautions to slow down the spread of the disease.

Schools are being closed. Minnesota suspended on-site classes until at least March 27th. Catholic grade school teachers may offer classes online as an alternative as will many high schools and colleges. Schools in Venezuela are closed for the next 30 days as an extended spring break, although many students have not had classes at all for most of the year due to an extreme shortage of teachers. With salaries less than \$10 per month, many teachers have quit. Others stay on just to qualify for retirement benefits. In one public grade school I visit, more than half the classrooms are empty.

Churches are cancelling faith formation classes, meetings, dinners, and most gatherings other than Masses for the time being. Here at Jesucristo Resucitado that includes Lenten and Holy Week processions. It's difficult to plan such events in Minnesota where the weather can vary so much in March and April. A nice sunshiny day might be followed by a storm covering the entire region with a foot of snow. The weather in Venezuela is far more predictable. Every March and April day will be in the 90's with very low possibility of rain.

Parishioners in each neighborhood normally organize their own Lenten Way of the Cross passing through their streets with stations at homes along the way. Then on Good Friday hundreds of people come together for a Way of the Cross that winds through every neighborhood on a seven-mile route. On Palm Sunday and Easter parishioners gather at a large roundabout a half-mile from church and march up the avenue on the way to Mass singing, chanting and waving palm branches. People will definitely miss these processions.

This past weekend we made some changes in the way we interact with one another at Mass. Venezuelans are very expressive and many parishioners commonly greet one another with a hug and kiss on the cheek at the sign of peace and after Mass. I was surprised to see how well they adjusted to the directive to refrain from physical contact as well as receiving Communion in the hand rather than on the tongue.

With most activities being cancelled in schools, churches and other public places, I am curious to see how things will go with public transportation. Unlike Minnesota, most folks here don't have cars and rely on buses for getting around. It's common to see bus after bus go by on major streets with people packed in like sardines. Another heavily congested location is the main city market, kind of like an enormous outdoor farmers market with hundreds of tiny booths, where shoppers are constantly rubbing shoulders, snaking their way through the crowds making their purchases.

While it is important that we take appropriate precautions, it is also essential not to be caught up with great fear. In China, where the virus first appeared, only a few dozen new cases have been reported in recent days compared with thousands during the peak of the epidemic. We will learn to deal with this new virus as we have with influenza which is actually far more contagious. Some precautions for avoiding the spread of the virus are the same as for colds and flu: wash your hands thoroughly, avoid touching your face often, drink plenty of liquids, cover your cough, and stay at home if you feel sick. Perhaps attention given to avoiding the spread of the coronavirus at this time may result in better protection against flu and other diseases in the future as well.

In this Lenten season we remember that Jesus' suffering and death became the means of our salvation. Good things can come as the result of the struggles we face in life. Along with better prevention against other diseases, we pray that this time of focus on the coronavirus result in greater appreciation for our health and health providers, and that it make us more sensitive and compassionate for people who suffer in any way.

Points to ponder

How have the precautions against the coronavirus affected your life, that of your family, that of your parish?
How can you be a support for those who suffer from coronavirus or any other illness or problem in life?

The Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis has staffed and supported parishes in the diocese of Ciudad Guayana in Venezuela since 1970. These "Did you know?" papers are designed to give you a better understanding of life in Venezuela and to strengthen connections between the parishes of the Archdiocese and their archdiocesan mission during our 50th anniversary year. Please direct any comments or suggestions for future papers to Fr. Denny Dempsey at ddempsey@churchofstdominic.org or 651-368-7324.