

Dear Parishioner,

the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you!

I hope you are safe and well, and managing to get on with your day-to-day activities, as much as possible, during this increasingly difficult time.

There is a lot of fear and uncertainty at the moment, which is understandable. Unfortunately, as we have heard in media reports, there have been occasions when this anxiety has led some people to act in ways that are not in the true spirit of Christian charity and support for one another.

There are also good grounds for hope, too. I have heard of many examples of selfless and altruistic acts of service to those most vulnerable and in need, and this is good news indeed!

We are extremely fortunate in St. Columba's in having a community that can rightly pride itself in its sense of solidarity and mutual support. This is the time to live out our Christian faith, as well as to adhere to the values of Lent. As we know, this is a season of penitence, and of the disciplines of prayer, fasting, and alms-giving; as such, it is also a season of thinking of others, of putting the less fortunate before ourselves.

With these points in mind, could I possibly make a few suggestions for us all to consider in the days and weeks to come, based on the teachings of the Catholic Church, and on our faith?

1. Resist panic. This is not to say there is no reason to be concerned, or that we should ignore the sound advice of medical professionals and public health experts. Panic and fear, though, are not from God. Calm and hope are. It is possible to respond to a crisis seriously and deliberately, while maintaining an inner sense of calm and hope.

St. Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, often talked about two forces in our interior lives: one that draws us toward God and the other away from God. The one that draws us away from God, which he labelled the evil spirit, "causes gnawing anxiety, saddens and sets up obstacles. In this way it unsettles people by false reasons aimed at preventing their progress." Sound familiar? Don't lend credence to lies or rumours, or give in to panic. Trust what the medical experts tell us, not those who fear-monger.

Panic pulls us away from the help that God wants to give us. It is not coming from God. What *is* coming from God? St. Ignatius tells us: God's spirit "stirs up courage and strength, consolations, inspirations and tranquillity." So trust in the calm and hope you feel. That is the voice to listen to. As Jesus reminds us many times in the Gospel, "Do not be afraid!"

2. Do not demonise. Resist the temptation to scapegoat, or to blame someone, which increases in time of stress and shortages. Covid-19 is not a "foreign" disease. It is no-one's "fault." Likewise, the people who become infected are not to blame. Remember that Jesus was asked about a blind man: "Who sinned, that this man was born blind?" Jesus' response: "No one" (Jn 9:2). Illness is not a punishment. So don't demonise and don't hate!

Many things have been cancelled because of the coronavirus. Love is NOT one of them.

3. Care for the sick. This pandemic may be with us for some time. Do what you can to help others, especially the elderly, the disabled, the poor and isolated. Remember, though, to take the necessary precautions; don't be reckless and risk spreading the disease, but also don't forget the fundamental Christian duty to help others. "I was sick, and you came to visit me," said Jesus (Mt 25). Remember that Jesus lived during a time when people had no access to even the most rudimentary medical care, and so visiting the sick was even more hazardous than it is today.

Thankfully, we have modern means of communication: telephones, e-mail, Facetime, and so on. Why not use these to keep in touch with others, particularly the most vulnerable? A friendly voice on the other end of the phone can work wonders for someone who is stuck at home.

Are you going shopping? Why not contact someone who is housebound or vulnerable, and ask if they need anything? You don't need to come in close contact: just leave the messages at their door, and inform them.

Above all, let's keep our hearts open to all those in need.

Let's not permit our consciences to become infected, too!

4. Care for your parish. Each Parish Priest, as a local shepherd, cares deeply for his flock, to whom he is entrusted. You can be assured that you are all in my thoughts and prayers, each and every day.

There is no question of closing churches at the present time, though this does not discount the possibility of a future time when Masses might be celebrated 'behind closed doors'. This will have a number of serious implications: pastoral, sacramental, social, psychological .. and financial. Could I therefore invite you all to consider setting up a Standing Order for your contributions to the parish, if you have not already do so? More and more people may begin to remain at home, but our churches still need to be maintained.

5. Pray. I will be keeping St. Columba's open, and celebrating Mass and the Sacraments, for as long as I can. You are all welcome to join me, as always! There will be plenty of room to sit apart from one another! The closure of churches comes at some cost: For many people, this removes one of the most consoling parts of their lives—the Mass and the Eucharist—and isolates them even more from the community at a time when they most need support.

What can we do instead? There are many televised and livestreamed Masses available, as well as ones broadcast on the radio. But even if you can't find one, or don't have access to the internet, you can pray on your own. When you do, remember that you're still part of a community. There is the longstanding tradition in our Church of receiving a "spiritual communion;" if you cannot participate in the Mass in person, you can unite yourself with God in prayer. You can meditate on the Sunday Gospel on your own, or – even better – with your family! This is an ideal time for parents to spend time teaching their children how to pray, and to join them in prayer. Why not pray the rosary, or meditate using a holy image or icon? Remember that the persecuted Christians in the early Church prayed and shared their faith in the catacombs, and we can do the same. Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Mt. 18:20).

6. Trust that God is with you. Many people, especially those who are self-isolating, may feel a sense of loneliness that compounds their fear. Some of us will naturally ask: Why is this happening?

There is no satisfactory answer to that question, which has, at its core, the question of why suffering exists, something that saints and theologians have pondered over the centuries. In the end, it is the greatest of mysteries. At the same time, we know that Jesus understands our suffering and accompanies us in the most intimate of ways. He experienced the most extreme form of suffering imaginable, on the Cross. All for us. Remember too that during his public ministry Jesus spent a great deal of time with those who were sick. Jesus understands us, not only because He is divine and understands all things, but because He is also human and experienced all these things. Go to him in prayer. And trust that he hears you and is with you.

We will move through this together, with God's help, and with the support and love of each other.

Please find below a prayer, written by the Holy Father Pope Francis. I have included another prayer as an attachment for you.

United in prayer and faith, and remembering the words of St. Paul: "Caritas Christi Urget Nos" – The Love Of Christ Urges Us On!

God bless,
Fr. Domenico.

Pope Francis' Prayer to Our Lady, Health of the Sick

*O Mary, you shine continuously on our journey as a sign of salvation and hope.
We entrust ourselves to you, Health of the Sick.
At the foot of the Cross you participated in Jesus' pain,
with steadfast faith.
You, Salvation of the Roman People, know what we need.
We are certain that you will provide, so that,
as you did at Cana of Galilee,
joy and feasting might return after this moment of trial.
Help us, Mother of Divine Love,
to conform ourselves to the Father's will
and to do what Jesus tells us:
He who took our sufferings upon Himself, and bore our sorrows to bring us,
through the Cross, to the joy of the Resurrection. Amen.
We seek refuge under your protection, O Holy Mother of God.
Do not despise our pleas – we who are put to the test – and deliver us from
every danger, O glorious and blessed Virgin.*