

April 19, 2020

Dearest Parishioners,

I apologize that it's been a few weeks since I've written a direct letter to you. With the increase of live stream masses, it's given me the opportunity to speak directly to you through those homilies rather than through a letter. Added to that, there has not been any change in the status of things to report to you.

I write to you today filled with hope as the light begins to grow at the end of the tunnel. The Diocese has extended its public mass ban until May 15 for the greater KC area, but for the rural communities, such as ours, it is tied in with the governor's decision to extend until May 3. When that deadline is reached, depending on how our local government chooses to proceed, there is the chance that public masses could resume on May 4. It is my sincerest hope and prayer that with appropriate distancing between families, masses can finally resume and life can begin to return to normal.

In the meantime, today is Divine Mercy Sunday, marking the end of the Easter Octave and memorializing the tremendous gift that is the mercy of God: limitless and given to us freely. But in our current situation, many could make the argument that Divine Mercy seems to be in short supply. God is often our first target to blame when this imperfect world filled with imperfect people who make imperfect decisions affects us in a way that we don't like. He's an easy punching bag because He doesn't tend to fight back, which is something we would never want to have happen (see Job chapters 38-41). But in our heart of hearts we know that God is not the author of sin and evil, and that our troubles are not caused by Him. In fact, it is in the midst of such hardships that we can actually see the Divine Mercy of God, if we're actually looking for it.

Two years ago, when I was assigned to Cathedral of St. Joseph and St. Mary parishes in St. Joseph, MO, with Fr. Matt Rotert, I woke up Easter Sunday morning with a clogged ear. A q-tip inserted in there came out with a little blood on the end of it, scaring me enough to ask my doctor to take a look at it. He was a parishioner and was going to look before the 11:30 Easter Sunday mass. He said it was blocked and there was a small abrasion, but nothing serious. He then left town for vacation and Fr. Rotert left for Rome the next day as well.

The next day I was in Kansas City with family and noticed in the afternoon that my hearing started to change. Anytime there was a loud noise, the tone would shift in my head, and this included me speaking. On Tuesday and Wednesday, luckily days without school since I was teaching full time, the pain in my ear worsened and I started to notice abrasions on the outside of the ear as well. My doctor was out of town, but through text message descriptions he was able to call in prescriptions for me to try and treat the problem. After coaching the girls soccer team Wednesday night which was quite cold and windy, I was sitting upstairs in the rectory when everything seemed to change. I became nauseous, very dizzy on my feet and even when sitting, I couldn't keep anything down, even water.

April 19, 2020

I had to call in sick to school on Thursday, although we still had the 7am mass at Cathedral and I was the only priest there. I didn't want to cancel it because there was no time to inform people who would be on their way. So I stumbled through, holding the altar more than usual for balance and unfortunately trying to get through it as quickly as possible. I immediately went back upstairs and was in bed most of the day. I would get a headache from lying down too long, probably from blood rushing to my head, and if I sat up or stood up, I would get dizzy and nauseous and throw up whatever water I had managed to sip. I wasn't eating anything, I wasn't even hungry.

I had to take Friday off from school as well since my symptoms hadn't really improved. I went to see my doctor who was now back in town and he confirmed what I definitely knew, that everything had gotten a lot worse since Sunday. I got a round of shots, another round of prescriptions, and back to the rectory I went. Upon my arrival, the staff was very concerned and wanting very much to help. One volunteered to run out to get me some soup for lunch and gatorade as well, being very motherly to me which is something we don't realize how much we miss until we don't have it anymore. I started to improve throughout the day but had to miss coaching a game Friday night, in which we scored the first goals against Maryville in my career at the school, but I wasn't able to witness it.

Sometime late Friday night, I started to notice a change in my facial muscles. One side didn't seem to be responding. So Saturday morning I texted my doctor again and sent him photos of my face in various positions that he asked me to do and he said it was the beginning stages of Bell's palsy, where one side of your face's muscles basically stop working properly. This was no doubt caused by the ear issue. So he called in more prescriptions (I think at that point I was on everything but roller skates), but then said he would deliver them to me which he did, along with soups for lunch and dinner. Since I was still dizzy on my feet, he asked what happens when I can't do my job. I said you get a sub, which I tried to do. I called Conception Abbey and a few other diocesan priests on Thursday and Friday, seeking coverage for the weekend, but none could. Added to that, I had to cover all five weekend masses at both parishes since Fr. Rotert was out of town. "Lucky me", I told him.

It was Saturday afternoon when I realized that my sarcastic response of "lucky me" was actually true. Lucky me. I had a doctor who interrupted his vacation to call in prescriptions, saw me at a moment's notice, and delivered prescriptions and food. I had a parish staff who went out of their way to make sure I was feeling as well as possible. I had an assistant coach who not only handled the game on Friday really well, but had constantly been checking up on me to see how I was feeling. And despite not being at full health by any stretch of the imagination, I was much better by the weekend than just a few days before, just in time for the weekend of masses. Lucky me.

Those who believe in God don't believe in luck. We believe in providence. It was Divine Mercy Sunday. And then, just as now, despite what seemed to be a horrible situation, there was nothing but mercy. Divine Mercy comes from the cross. The cross was the ultimate punishment, the ultimate torture. He endured that so we wouldn't have to. He endured the cross so that when

April 19, 2020

we're faced with minor inconveniences by comparison, we can offer up our suffering with His for the sake of others. I share this story from my past, not as a direct comparison to today, but as a reflection. This isn't the first Divine Mercy Sunday I've experienced where mercy, to the untrained eye, seems to absent. We're asked to give a lot, but never more than we can handle. We're asked to make sacrifices, to endure hardship, but never more than we can handle. God endured His terrible passion, which He could handle, so that His Divine Mercy would be there for us when we're faced with situations that we can only handle with His help.

For the sake of His sorrowful passion, have mercy on us and on the whole world.

Be strong, be faithful, and be vigilant in prayer. My prayers are with you always.

Your servant in Christ,  
Fr. Koster