



Dear Nativity Parishioners,

I wish you all a very Blessed Easter!

For obvious reasons, “Happy Easter” doesn’t seem to cut it this year. There is not a whole lot to be happy about as we continue to deal with the changes in our normal lives brought about by the coronavirus pandemic. However, the Easter Season will last for fifty days and it is my hope, that we will be able to rise up from the depths of our self-isolating and social distancing by then.

I celebrated the Easter Vigil Mass on Holy Saturday night. For those of you who may have tuned in, this will be a little repetitive. In my homily at that Mass, I explained that I was having a hard time seeing the joy in the Resurrection. So much had been taken away from us during the Season of Lent. Things like our speaker series that so many of our parishioners were looking forward to attending had to be cancelled. We had events centered around the Corporal Works of Mercy that we could not follow through on because of the restrictions placed on public gatherings. We were forced to sacrifice in ways that we did not expect or anticipate this Lenten Season.

The Sacred Triduum during Holy Week is something that I look forward to every year. On Holy

Thursday morning, the priests of the Archdiocese gather at the Cathedral and we renew our priestly promises. Those are the same promises that we first made on our ordination day. We also bring back the sacred oils that will be used for the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and The Anointing of the Sick. That was taken from us this year.



On Holy Thursday evening, we gather as a parish and celebrate the Mass of the Lord's Supper. We commemorate at that Liturgy, the institution of the Sacrament of the Most Holy Eucharist. We also reenact the Lord's great act of service by washing the feet of parishioners, just as Jesus washed the feet of his apostles. That was taken from us this year.

Following the Mass, we have a Eucharistic Procession and place the Blessed Sacrament at the altar of repose and we begin our time of waiting with the Lord as he endures his Agony in the Garden. Many people have the custom of visiting three churches during this time of adoration and prayer. That was taken from us this year.

On Good Friday we walk the Way of the Cross with Jesus. After the reading of the Passion, we have the opportunity to Venerate the Cross. That is a very powerful act in which all present in the church come forward and show some sign of reverence for the Cross of Jesus, either by touching it or kissing it. Some simply bow or genuflect. Whatever means is used, it is a powerful moment. That was taken from us this year.

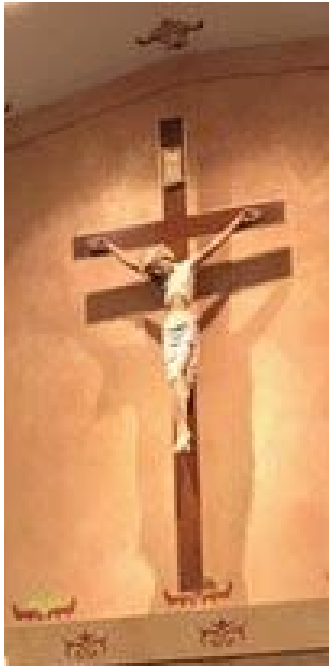
At the end of the Good Friday service, everyone in attendance has the opportunity to receive Holy Communion. Even though there is no Mass, enough hosts are consecrated the night before at the Mass of the Lord's Supper for all to receive on Good Friday. That was taken from us this year.

On Holy Saturday, the church remains in darkness. The closed and locked church represents Jesus in the tomb. It is during that time that the church gets a good cleaning and the flowers arrive and everything is set for the Easter Vigil Mass. There is always excitement and anticipation around all of the preparation for this Mass. That was taken from us this year.

At the Easter Vigil Mass, we begin outside with a blazing fire. I love that! The bigger the fire – the better! The Easter Fire is blessed and then the new Paschal Candle is lit. The Candle is carried into the dark church. The chant, **The Light of Christ** is sung three times as the Candle is carried down the main aisle. As the people follow behind, their own candles are lit. By the time the Paschal Candle makes it to the front of the Altar, the church is aglow with Easter Light. That was taken from us this year.

During the Vigil Mass, we celebrate the Easter Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and First

Holy Eucharist. The catechumens have been preparing for this moment for months. We had nine to be Baptized at the Vigil. That was taken from us this year.



It was on Holy Saturday afternoon that I was really struggling. Because of all the things that were taken from us this year, the one I had the most difficulty with was YOU! For weeks now, Fr. Brian, Fr. Friel and I have been celebrating Mass without you! That has been an odd and disheartening experience for each of us. You are truly missed at Nativity. You were taken from us this year.

As I spent time alone in the church on Saturday arranging the flowers, few as they are, and vacuuming the sanctuary, I was worried about what I would preach about at the evening Mass. In the midst of all of that, I got an email from a friend of mine. I was busy and distracted at the time, so I did not pay too much attention to it.

Only hours later, as I sat in the dark empty church did I look at that email again. Then I knew I had my homily! The content of the email was a comparison of the story of How the Grinch Stole Christmas and our current situation. As you may recall, in the story, the Grinch tried to ruin Christmas for the people of Whoville. He took everything from them. The Christmas trees, the decorations, the lights, the presents were all taken away! Despite the Grinch's best efforts to steal Christmas from the Whos, Christmas still came to Whoville. It came just the same!

Up until the time that I read that email, I was focusing on all the things that were taken from us this year. However, once I read that email, I realized that despite everything that the coronavirus has taken from us this year, Easter still came. It came just the same.

Although Easter looked different than it had in the past, we, as Catholic Christians, still celebrated the Resurrection of our Lord! Even though we could not gather in church, many joined us online through our Livestream system. I had the opportunity during Holy Week to thank Fr. Citino for having it installed years ago. On an average Sunday, we get 7 or 8 viewers. On Easter Sunday we had 563. What a blessing this technology has been for our parish.

For our Holy Week services, I invited our Music Director, Mike Klenk, and the five Sisters of Saint Joseph who live in the convent at Nativity to join the priests for the celebrations. Their presence at each of the services added beauty and solemnity to them. I am grateful for their participation.

I am grateful to all of you as well. For one, there have been many expressions of gratitude on your part to Fr. Brian, Fr. Friel and myself, for trying to keep things as normal as possible at Nativity. This has been strange and odd for us as priests, but knowing you were on the other end of that camera, made it a little more normal for us. I am very grateful for your virtual attendance at Nativity.

As pastor, I am grateful for the many of you who have sent in your weekly envelopes by mail. It is a great help to keep the parish operating. A great many of you also sent personal notes with the contribution. I have them all stacked on my desk. I have read each one of them. Unfortunately, I had planned to write back to each of you who took the time to write a note, but that is just not possible. Instead, I would like to take this opportunity to thank you all for your generosity and kindness in the donation you made and the words you wrote.

I am so very proud of our parish community. I am blessed to be a part of you! We are not over this crisis yet and, in fact, there might still be more to come. School is closed for the remainder of the year but we still do not know how long this separation will last. Several of our weddings have now been postponed. I am hoping that by Pentecost the worst will be over and we can welcome the Holy Spirit descending upon us gathered once again in our church at Nativity of Our Lord Parish. Until then, we will continue to stream our Masses and the church will be open for personal prayer during the day from 9am to 7pm. Please stop by to visit the Lord for a few minutes if you can.

May God bless you this Easter Season,
Fr. Joe

