

Faith & Safety During the Pandemic

The coronavirus pandemic presents society with many challenges regarding public gatherings. When attending Mass, we endure a number of safety measures, compelling some to wonder if following the recommendations of medical experts indicates a lack of faith in God to watch over us. I will try to address this as best I can.

The Book of Genesis teaches that God intended humanity to dwell in the paradise of the Garden of Eden, a life free from suffering, hunger, disease, and death. Humanity, however, chose to sin and, consequently, lost paradise and became mortal. Through sin, we reject not only God, but all that God is, including life. The only realistic consequence of rejecting life is death, which is why the bible teaches that the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). Humanity ended up in this world where death is a reality and we contend with all the different aspects of mortality such as aging, injury, and illness. The good news is that Jesus paid the deadly wage of sin on our behalf, permitting us to attain eternal life in the perfection of heaven (1Peter 2:24-25; 1Thessalonians 4:16-17; Revelation 21:1-4). But we are not there yet. In this life, we struggle with all kinds of bad things, including the pandemic. This world challenges us and encourages us to practice the various kinds of virtues: humility, charity, faith, and so on. Let us now specifically consider the virtue of faith and how to understand it amidst of the pandemic.

Last spring, some people told a CNN reporter, in one way or another, that they had absolute faith that God would prevent them from being infected by the coronavirus.¹ A powerful faith in God is, of course, a wonderful thing, but is faith truly a 100% effective barrier against Covid-19? To begin with, we readily see that faithful Christians are susceptible to all the various illnesses of this world, everything from the common cold to the ravages of cancer. Should it be any different with the coronavirus? Many of the saints suffered from different kinds of disease and many of them died as a result. For example, St. Bernadette, the visionary of Lourdes, suffered from cholera and died at the age of thirty-five from tuberculosis. Saint Damien of Molokai ministered to a leper colony. He contracted leprosy and died of it. Consider Bishop Francis Gartland, the first bishop of the Diocese of Savannah. He is not a canonized saint, but he was a very holy and charitable man (the Gartland Award of our diocese is named after him). The big epidemic in his day was Yellow Fever. Bishop Gartland caught Yellow Fever and died of it. St. Bernadette, St. Damien, and Bishop Gartland each had a powerful faith life, and each died of a type of illness.

In terms of Covid-19, many Christians around the world, Catholic and otherwise, have contracted it, and the virus has spread in churches during various functions. This should come as no surprise because the many bad things that happen out in society can and do happen inside church buildings as well: crime, illness, fires, floods, etc. For example, in 1980, St. Oscar Romero, the archbishop of San Salvador, was assassinated at the altar while celebrating Mass. In 2019, the great Notre Dame Cathedral burned

¹ CNN: <https://us.cnn.com/videos/us/2020/04/04/ohio-church-service-covid-19-pandemic-tuchman-pkg-ac360-vpx.cnn> (internet accessed Aug. 18, 2020).

down. Church buildings are wonderful places for a variety of reasons, but are not impenetrable shields against the tribulations of the world.

In Matthew 7:24-27, Jesus uses the image of stormy weather to symbolize the various bad things that come along in our lives. Jesus says, "Everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and buffeted the house. But it did not collapse; it had been set solidly on rock. And everyone who listens to these words of mine but does not act on them will be like a fool who built his house on sand. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and buffeted the house. And it collapsed and was completely ruined." The point I am making is that both houses were struck and buffeted by the storm. The house built upon rock was hit just as hard as the house built upon sand. One of the storms society is currently dealing with is, of course, the coronavirus. The pandemic affects all of us in one way or another, from the inconvenience of social distancing and facemasks, to financial struggles and concern for the safety of our students, to actual infection and even death. The virtue of faith does not make us immune from the ravages of hardships. Rather, faith involves believing God gives us the grace to endure the various troubles of life (Psalm 23:1-6; Matthew 11:28) and believing heaven awaits to provide eternal peace and safety (John 11:25-26). Through the power of God, we endure the storms that batter us like a house built solidly upon rock.

Yes, God can and does intervene in special and miraculous ways to keep certain people safe during calamities in accordance with his will. Sometimes, God prevents a particular storm from materializing in someone's life, or he may make it vanish completely before it can cause much harm. But we must be careful about presuming how God will choose to act in our individual lives.

One of the ways that God helps us to endure hardship is through medical science. Keep in mind that one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit is knowledge; the human intellect is a gift from God. Moreover, the Catechism of the Catholic Church has this to say on the topic of faith and science: "Though faith is above reason, there can never be any real discrepancy between faith and reason. Since the same God who reveals mysteries and infuses faith has bestowed the light of reason on the human mind, God cannot deny himself, nor can truth ever contradict truth. Consequently, methodical research in all branches of knowledge, provided it is carried out in a truly scientific manner and does not override moral laws, can never conflict with the faith, because the things of the world and the things of faith derive from the same God. The humble and persevering investigator of the secrets of nature is being led, as it were, by the hand of God in spite of himself, for it is God, the conservator of all things, who made them what they are" (CCC #159). Therefore, acting upon the advice of credible medical experts is not contrary to having faith in God. Rather, it indicates trusting how God works through medical procedures to help keep us safe.

This is not to say that medical experts and scientists do not make mistakes. All people are fallible, including doctors, nurses, and researchers. That is why it is important to gather information from credible sources, reflect upon it, and then prayerfully make the best-informed decisions one can. And let me be clear that this is the only point I am making. I am not questioning the faith of those who do not do this. People make decisions for a variety of reasons unknown to me, so I am in no position to judge. I am simply defending those who heed the advice of medical experts against the notion that doing so somehow demonstrates a lack of faith in God.

Faith is referred to as a theological virtue, meaning that God infuses it into the souls of the faithful to help us act as his children and better attain eternal life. In addition to faith, there are two other theological virtues: hope and charity. Sometimes we hear the third listed as love, but the kind of love being expressed is the loving of others through charitable deeds. For the final part of this article, I would like to address how I see the interplay of faith, hope and charity working in my own mindset during the pandemic. You can decide if you think it is worthy of imitation.

It is possible to be infected with Covid-19 and be asymptomatic, meaning that one is sick but does not know it because no symptoms are showing. These people can still transmit the virus to others. Moreover, people (whether infected or not) may pick up the virus on their hands, clothes, or something else and unintentionally pass it to those around them. The virtue of charity compels me to follow the safety recommendations of the medical community to limit the ways I could possibly transmit the virus to others.

In accordance with the virtue of hope, consider what happened in the Book of Daniel when the king of Babylon ordered three Hebrews named Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to commit idolatry by worshipping a golden statue. If they did not, they would be executed by being thrown into a huge, blazing furnace. The three men told the king, "If our God, whom we serve, can save us from the white-hot furnace and from your hands, O king, may he save us! But even if he will not, you should know, O king, that we will not serve your god or worship the golden statue which you set up" (Daniel 3:17-18).

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were cast into the furnace and God sent an angel to save them. But notice the exact words they used when threatened by the king: "If our God can save us ...may he save us ...but even if he will not" (emphasis added). They expressed hope that God would deliver them from harm but did not presume that God definitely would. Maybe it was meant for them to die in the furnace as martyrs, or maybe that was simply their time to die, but it turns out that God had other plans for them. Using this as an example of the virtue of hope, I hope we do not get Covid-19 and pray that God keeps us safe from it. But I also understand that the virus may be a cross some of us are to carry, perhaps even me.

In terms of the virtue of faith, if I become infected, I have faith that God will help me endure the illness and persevere in my spiritual journey. One day, my life on this planet will come to an end, whether it is a result of the coronavirus or something else. But I have faith that Jesus gets us through hard times and delivers us from the many troubles of the world, turning our earthly death into a doorway to an eternity of peace and joy in heaven, safe from all harm.

And that is a good note to end on. When I was a kid in summer camp, we sang the song, "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands," and God still does! No matter how bleak things may seem, the bad things in life do not have the last say. The pandemic does not have the last say. Illness and poverty do not have the last say. War and hatred do not have the last say. Pain and death do not have the last say. The one who does have the last say is Jesus Christ! And in John 14:1-3, he says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You have faith in God; have faith also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If there were not, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be."

Rev. Eric R. Filmer

Aug. 18, 2020

All bible quotes are taken from the New American Bible (accessed via <https://bible.usccb.org/bible>).