

## **When the world whirls around us, return to the Cross**

Bishop Timothy L. Doherty

September 6, 2020

Some people say that the COVID-19 pandemic is the biggest challenge. Others tell me that it has uncovered larger issues such as racism, healthcare disparities, policing flaws, income inequality, and so on. It is easy to get sucked into the vortex of data and opinions. Is there some quiet place to stand in order to sort priorities? We do not pursue quiet for its own sake, but so we can listen for God above the din. Isn't this how a baptized Catholic Christian navigates?

What am I to make of the subtractions exacted during this pandemic? Some wise commentators counsel not to run away from this question, or to find new distractions when parties, concerts and sports seasons have been erased. By God's grace, some losses make room for more peace as suffering teaches us what gifts we possess individually and as a community. We can't minimize the effects of the pandemic. A search for meaning does not negate the tragedy inflicted by 183,000 coronavirus-related deaths in the US (August 31). At some point, we will better appreciate what our current limitations have done to hurt our ability to console others, to grieve, to participate in good-bye rituals like visitations, funerals, graveside prayers. And funeral lunches. The bishop who ordained me a priest believed the lunches were the key. "That's where it happens," he would say. For us veterans of such gatherings, humorous recollections and affectionate appreciations spotlight what we most value in other human beings to help us imitate them.

For me, the losses that are most difficult are the limits on my ability to thank people, to accompany them in tough moments, and to celebrate milestones in relationships that go back for decades. I have missed some important family gatherings, and given the ages of some of us, chances for reunions are thinning out. My tenth anniversary of episcopal ordination was celebrated with our staff having box lunches in the back yard. My next birthday (they are all "big ones" at this point) will be subdued. On the upside, people who retell embarrassing stories about me will not be able to gather in any numbers.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has not gathered in prayer since last November. Video conferences can only do part of our ministry. In addition to us bishops, there are many lay men and women who work for the conference or consult on committees. We are hurting from diminished opportunities to personally interview incoming talent and to celebrate goodbyes with people who are retiring or moving on. New bishops are being ordained with very few people able to gather in their cathedrals.

So how do I situate myself as the world whirls around us? Where should we imagine we are when we feel the world passed us by? In recent months, I regularly return to the cross of Christ. This isn't to make myself feel better by standing next to Jesus's greater suffering. The cross itself, which we reverence on Good Friday, testifies to God's love for us in Christ. It was not only our sins that Jesus could see from the cross, it was what was worth loving and saving in us. Here we search out what the pandemic has not taken away, and must be valued by us all the more.

The vertical and the horizontal elements of the cross remind us about what is daily possible. How often did Christ direct our attention to the Father, and almost simultaneously to our neighbor? To love God

and our neighbor. For me, it seems quite important to look at each of the complex issues I named earlier and ask myself/ourselves, “in regard to issue X, am I loving God and my neighbor in this matter?”

Being a Catholic Christian is about more than avoiding or suppressing evil. The greater call, maybe especially because of our restricted circumstances, is to keep reaching out in active love. To attach charitable impulses to structured encounters and accompaniments. As Jesus reminded us in the Gospel of the Twenty third Sunday, suffering will be part of ministering the truth. As we look for a way through the current struggles, it might be better to be remembered for what we suffered for, rather than what we suffered from.