

6 Experiencing Covid-19 in New York City

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This is my story of surviving the covid-19 virus. It is one story among many, each with different configurations of symptoms, bodily responses, access to medical care. There are hundreds of thousands of stories people have not lived to tell. Their stories must be told by the grieving loved ones left behind.

My story begins with Co-vid 19 virus attacking quickly, without warning, within hours rendering me helpless. Living in New York City, it should not have been unexpected. Ominous news reports warned the virus was coming, first China, then Europe, Seattle, and it was matter of time before New York City. People prepared as if a blizzard was coming, laying in extra groceries for a long weekend. More contagious than other viruses, even able to be transmitted by people without symptoms, people began to work from home. The New York's Saint Patrick's Day parade was cancelled. Sporting events, concerts, operas, ballet, even Broadway theaters went dark, all social events postponed until the storm passed.

I had a persistent cold, but went to bed unconcerned, relaxed, eager for tomorrow. Within a few hours I awoke with fever, chills, sweat, constant thirst. My rib cage, front and back ached, the top of my head hurt. I lost control of bodily functions. I lost track of time, days blended, exhaustion created confusion, and then delirium. I had no idea what day it was, I had no idea a week had passed, nor did I care. I cared only about finding a posture that would allow me to rest without hurting. My religious community¹⁶ called a doctor who made a special house call to examine me. He was confident I had the virus, but I could not be tested because there were no tests to be had. There was no specific treatment, and since I wasn't gasping for breath and my blood pressure was reasonable, I would be treated at home, placed in absolute quarantine, and given medications to reduce my symptoms. If my breathing became more painful, I would need immediate hospitalization.

During the first week of my illness, I did not think about living or dying, nor did I think about getting better. I was too exhausted to be anxious. My body focused on escaping pain and coping with fever, it had no time for consciousness, or fear. Time was measured only by sensations of sickness, brief respites of sleep and the gift of delirium that allowed escape. I did not understand what my body was doing. There was no energy for prayer.

In the second week of the illness, I was fortunate. The medications provided enough symptom relief to allow me sleep. The virus began to work its way out of my body without the crushing shortness of breath that sent people to the hospital or grave. My religious community made it possible for me to devote the little energy I had to healing. I did not have to worry about providing for myself or my family. I did not have to worry about losing my job. The truly saintly religious sisters¹⁷ at the rectory would call me at mealtimes, offer encouragement, prepare food my system could tolerate, and leave it outside my quarantined room.

As symptoms abated, my self-awareness grew, and with it, recognition that I was not alone. Increasingly I was aware of those protecting me. Through the sacrament of my cell phone, people anointed me with daily text messages, breaking the quarantine with care, concern, love, and always prayer-assurances, promises, guarantees of prayer. Emails transformed into the angelic announcement be not afraid! Since talking was difficult for me people texted and emailed: my sister several times a day, members of my religious community, friends, parishioners, all texting their love and prayers for me. Facebook friends prayed online for me.

¹⁶ I am a member of the Missionary Society of St. Paul, known as the Paulist Fathers, the first religious order of men founded in the United States

¹⁷ Oblate Sisters of Jesus the Priest dedicated to praying for and ministering to seminarians and priests.

When I could not pray for myself, all these people prayed for me. Their prayers breathed for me. They still do.

Gradually, the virus lessened its hold on me. It was not going to clog my lungs. It would let me sleep. It would let me be aware and for increasing moments, alert. I was weakened but going to survive. From the news I learned the virus created a worldwide community of the suffering, with me, among the most fortunate. I would hear a consistent wail of ambulance sirens carrying those sicker than I to an emergency room. They were part of me, so wordlessly, automatically, I prayed for us. The Latin chant for Easter, the Regina Coeli, came unbidden into my mind, and with inner music I had not summoned, I entrusted the sick-including me- to whatever God would do with us.

My first intentional prayer was watching Pope Francis pray in a desolate and deserted St. Peter's square. I don't remember anything he said, nor the words to any of the prayers, but I do remember the stark picture of him sitting in the rain, praying, for all those around the world, the dead, the grieving, the medical personnel, the recovering, for me. As I watched him sit there, an early childhood memory materialized. I remembered my father, on Holy Thursday, taking me by the hand for Holy Thursday Services at our parish of Holy Redeemer. The ceremonies were extravagant, choirs, processions, stripping the altar, the tabernacle gaping open with the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament in an elaborate altar of reservation. Neighborhood children plundered flowers from gardens to adorn the shrine. I did not know why we were sitting, kneeling before the side altar. "This is Jesus in jail after he was arrested, and we must keep him company" is how my father explained it to me. We walked to churches in neighborhoods I was forbidden to cross the street to visit: St. Michaels, St. Theresa, St. Josaphat, St. Mark, St. Henry, St. Stanislaus. We visited Jesus in his side altar jail in each church, saying a prayer, keeping him company. In St. Peter's Basilica, Pope Francis was sitting before the Blessed Sacrament, keeping all those imprisoned by the covid-19 virus company. I sat with him, Pope Francis in the rain, me in my armchair joining his prayer for so many.

That night, and the next morning, and everyday after that I would pray for the ill, those who cared for them, for the dead and their loved ones, for all those out of work-worried, anxious about housing, food, future. A question haunted me, and haunts me still, why me? Why am I recovering while so many are not? What does it mean? Do not misunderstand me, I do not believe God kills some people and saves favorites, we are loved equally in the eyes of the God who made us out of love for love; made, Jesus tells us, for life to the full. Perhaps there is no reason why I contracted a less virulent strain of the virus while more saintly and self-sacrificing souls contracted the more lethal version. I felt fear for the first time, fear of the fragility of life that spares some and strikes others down. This fear taught me that while I do not know why I am alive and others not, it is the responsibility of the living to pray for those who died and those they left behind.

Within a few days it would be Palm Sunday then Holy Week, a Holy Week unlike any other, a Holy Week so dangerous people could not go to Church to pray. Quarantine I could not go to Church. I did what I have never done in my 41 years of priesthood, celebrate a private Mass. A brother priest left a mass kit outside my door, and on Palm Sunday, I celebrated a Eucharist I will not soon forget. I was overwhelmed with a profound feeling of gratitude for the gift of my life, not simply that I survived but that I was alive at all! Thanksgiving poured thorough the readings, the passion, the words of the liturgy. The Mass went slowly, offered with deep gratitude for those whose prayers and love breathed for me, gratitude for those protecting and nursing my quarantine, praying for those suffering alone, dying alone, praying for those who could not see their dying loved ones, could not bury them nor hold each other in grief. Receiving the Eucharist, in communion with the Risen Lord, I was in communion with all those the crucified One loves and holds dear. The final blessing was God's blessing upon the city outside my bedroom window. I am a preacher. Capturing what I could of the Holy Spirit's whispers during that Eucharist, I posted my digital homily to my quarantined city.

„It happened so fast.
So very fast.

Sunday was well, happy, triumphant.
Thursday night, we gathered for Passover.
The next night, He was dead, buried by strangers.
Over and done in five short days.
It never struck me before -reading St. Matthew's passion-
As it strikes me now.
But now everything happens so fast.
People are sick and die, in less time.
The matriarch of a large Toms River Italian family
Dying without knowing two sons died before her.
Within the week, a New York physician dying in his husband's arms,
Nurses across the street making gowns of hefty bags,
Respiratory therapists asleep on their feet.
Everyone out of work-no rent, no food, no hugs, no future-
I went to work one Monday
Was sick by nightfall-and next I knew-or didn't know-
It was Sunday, which one?
It all happened within a week, to all of us
Milan, China, Spain, New York, everywhere.
No time to prepare, to react, to grieve, to think of any future.
The world ends quickly-even for Jesus.
This Sunday we wave no comforting Palms.
Comfort is found knowing the speed of disaster,
The speed of our surprise, suffering, grief,
Is shared by the swiftly Crucified
Who with dizzying speed raises us, as he was raised-
-into life with time only for love.
Amen. "¹⁸

The virus left behind a mere shell of vitality, which took longer to replenish than I anticipated. Recovery time was filled with anxiety by the world news penetrating my quarantine. The numbers of those who died in New York rapidly increased, day after day after day. Working from home and social distancing were luxuries many could not afford and the most vulnerable were disproportionately represented among the dead. Nursing homes could not protect their sick and elderly, and they too joined the torrential numbers of the dead. What was hidden in Wuhan was now manifest as the wingspan of this disease covered Europe, Great Britain, Ireland, Canada, and reached across to India and Pakistan. Infected, the world's economy was collapsing and hunger growing exponentially in Africa, South America, India, the Philippines. In the United States unemployment reached proportions not seen since the Great Depression in the 1930's. Helpless, I felt helpless not just about my body, but my country, and my world.

At the time of this writing, the virus is not under control. While diminishing in some locations, in others it flares into "hot spots." In my country testing is evasive and vaccine is an unrealized hope for perhaps years to come. It is apparent that we are not going to reopen as much as we must reinvent ourselves, beginning again, the parameters of our new life dictated by an enemy we have not conquered and whose reinvasion we fear.

Churches are closed. People cannot visit us; we cannot visit them. Digital efforts to broadcast the Mass and preach the gospel have intensified but are reaching only a fraction of our people. How can you be Catholic without community, without Eucharist? Yet, to do what we do best is infectious, a danger to the people of God. I am a priest ordained to Word, Sacrament and Service, and the structures of that ministry are unavailable and their future unknown. Helplessness becomes frustration and frustration becomes anger. The longer the pandemic continues, the more likely anger will accompany it, one more deadly by product of covid-19.

¹⁸ Mark David Janus, CSP., Ph.D. Palm Sunday 2020

Frustration, grief and anger blind us, enveloped in their haze we are unable to recognize the Risen Lord. Easter is hard to believe much less celebrate. I realized, through these words of Cardinal Carlo Martini, that I had been looking for Easter in all the wrong places:

“God did not perform any miracles to save Jesus from death, God is always with Jesus, on his side, and validating him. Therefore, it is not through amazingly powerful miracles, but in being with each one of us in our trials, in keeping company even in the deep recesses of our loneliness, in being close to our distress with the hope of eternal life that God reveals to be the “God with us,” the God and father of our Lord Jesus. God is everywhere someone suffers like Jesus, wherever someone dies like Jesus, wherever someone lives and suffers for love, for truth, for justice, for the poor; God is there to lessen the suffering of the world: This is the God of Jesus who is proclaimed in Jesus’ resurrection.”

The virus has closed the structures of the church, it has not drained the life of the church that is the People of God. Every night, at 7:00 pm, people around the world come to their balconies, open their windows or come to their front door to applaud the sacrificial love of everyone who works in health care, doctors, nurses, respiratory therapists, orderlies, sanitation workers, ambulance drivers; their love and sacrifice is obvious. The Spirit of the Risen Lord breathes through them.

The Spirit breathes through actions of kindness and mercy that have risen with this pandemic. I think of the almost daily news stories of people who delivery groceries to neighbors. The owners of shuttered restaurants who now cook for those who can no longer afford to buy their own groceries. People who spend their quarantine sewing essential face masks for those without. Business owners who reconfigured their workshops to make needed hospital gowns, converted factories to make ventilators.

Ordinary actions are now heroic, with bus and subway drivers, grocery store clerks, truck drivers, police, and firefighters who daily risk contact with this contagious virus so everyone else can go to work, buy groceries, remain protected. Teachers who must now prepare new on-line lessons for students who cannot leave home. Parents quarantined with their children, spouses with one another, and roommates unable to get away from each other, demonstrate added patience, kindness, a willingness to forgive and give of themselves. Friends make special efforts to reach out to friends they cannot visit. In a grim fashion, the funeral directors, are now charged with the corporal work of mercy to bury the dead loved ones cannot. Pope Francis calls these actions, “everyday holiness.” They are everyday manifestations of the Risen Lord. People may not be able to go to Church, Synagogue or Mosque, but that has not prevented them from breathing holiness into a world chocked with virus.

My story of covid-19 concludes with a lesson. A virus invisible to the eye is teaching the world just how fragile and interconnected we truly are. This interconnection is not simply an occasion for sickness, it is an opportunity for communion. In the end, we are connected to God only by love. The Risen Lord Jesus remains connected to us by love, a love that connects us to each other through lives of service, mercy, and kindness. This is how we will defeat the virus and rebuild our world.

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