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March 19, 2020

Dear Brothers in Christ,

This mid-March is unlike any other. It is a strange time. Its markers are disruption, inconvenience, isolation, discouragement, fear, anxiety, and sadness. The virus has upended all of our routines. And, while we sense that the virus has put us in a dangerous place, we also know that we have entered unknown territory, a foreign land.

This is not the first time people of faith have experienced alienation and dislocation and we can learn from the past. In fact, the story of Israel gives us hope, for it is in their moment of exile, of entering into unknown territory, that God reveals the full breadth of His fidelity, His presence and action in the world. In a word, the exile, while bringing great suffering, was even more so a moment of grace, for the People of God came to know the God who is close to them. How can Israel's experience of exile and alienation inspire us to see this crisis as a time of grace? How could God be moving in all of this?

Let me suggest some graces of this moment that you may want to share with your people. These are hidden blessings that we might easily overlook precisely because we are distracted and even absorbed by so much that is negative. Consider these graces:

**The grace of knowing our fragility.** You hear it said that young people take risks, sometimes really awful risks because they feel invulnerable. Well, it's not just young people who feel invulnerable. Even those of us who can count many years in our lives march into each day feeling in control and ready to master whatever we will face. Our sense of mastery over life is an illusion. We are fragile and vulnerable and not in control, even if we are not conscious of that. The grace of knowing our fragility in the time of the virus puts us in touch with a necessary trust and surrender into the hands of the God who made us, who has faithfully walked with us and who one day will call us home.

**The grace of true freedom.** With the virus, our movements are restricted and so are our options for doing things. The usual choices and freedom of movement are just not available. If we define our freedom in terms of the choices available to us, then the virus has made us much less free than we would like. On the other hand, the restrictions we experience can open an opportunity for us to reflect on the true meaning of freedom. In our religious tradition, genuine



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freedom is not about the number of choices we have, but about the possibility of giving ourselves over to God and others in love. Jesus says of himself, “No one takes my life from me. I lay it down to pick it up again. For this the Father loves me.” (See John 10) That is true freedom.

**The grace of time.** The pace of life has slowed with the virus. Less commuting, less opportunity to work, more empty spaces—this amounts to a very altered rhythm of life. We have more time on our hands, but without entertainments and sports and social gatherings, we don’t have ways to fill it up. This unusual, even odd situation may force us to reconfigure our sense of time. It has been observed that for most Americans, life is lived in a pendular rhythm of work and escape. We work hard and earn our escape time. Then we escape until we have to go back to work. But time is more than what is filled by work and escape. In our faith tradition, Sabbath time puts us in touch with another dimension of time. It is neither work nor escape but resting in God, an alert attentiveness to what is deep and sometimes mysterious in our lives. It is a gift to re-imagine time.

**The grace of each other.** Social distancing is, of course, the new normal for the time of the virus. Still, there are other ways, especially in our families, in which we have been pushed closer together. We are facing each other in our homes and across generations in new ways. That contact brings its own share of tension, no doubt. Still, it nudges us to rediscover each other and to value each other anew. It can teach us the value of “wasting time” with each other. Think, for example, of helping young people to realize the vulnerability of older members of their family and our need overall to protect and nurture each other. All this can awaken a new sense of urgency about “loving one another, as I have loved you,” in the words of Jesus.

**The grace of wisdom.** So much of our ordinary, “non-virus” life, is dominated by the pursuit of short-term results, such as financial, business and human-human transactions. The opposite of a short-term mindset is wisdom. Only wisdom cracks open the bigger picture of our faith tradition, in fact, the biggest picture imaginable. Wisdom gives us the capacity to look at all things in terms of God’s plan and destiny, of their ultimate goal. It is in moments of loss and upheaval that we are forced to take a fresh look at our lives and value the things that really matter. This time of the virus, upended as it is, pushes to take in the big picture. Then we can begin to name and embrace what really matters, what really counts.

There is so much that is sad and serious about the coronavirus and its impact on our lives and the lives of those we serve. All that is real enough. But, so too are the hidden graces



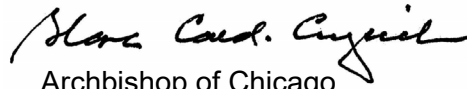
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that God has given His people in times of loss and exile into unfamiliar territory. All we need to do in response is open our eyes to the reality of God's faithful presence in our life and remember He walks with us now as he walked in fidelity with people in former times. We surely do not want to suggest to people that all the pain and struggle we face in moments like these will magically evaporate. But we can encourage them to trust in God's promise, revealed in the suffering Christ, that He will share our suffering and in the end will bring us into a greater share in His life.

These are some of the thoughts that have come during my prayer that God guide me in ways that can be of help to you in your ministry. I hope they are of some encouragement.

Let us continue to pray for one another.

In Christ,

  
Archbishop of Chicago