

“My peace I give to you”: Gaining peace of heart in a time of high anxiety

Earthly problems and resources are never our top priority, but they are a necessary concern, properly subordinated to our faith in God and spiritual welfare.

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid.” — John 14:27

The whole world seems to have fixed its attention on COVID-19, a.k.a. the coronavirus.

Many voices in the media and elsewhere are sounding a panic alarm. Then there are voices responding to perceived hysteria by treating the coronavirus very casually — a sort of “what’s all the fuss about” approach.

There are also countless people who are in-between these two extreme positions. These include medical professionals, community leaders, and journalists calling for reasonable protective measures. They also include ordinary people doing the best they can to figure all of this out and to follow the best advice available.

How should Catholics respond to the coronavirus? Should we panic? Should we denounce those who are panicking and treat this threat lightly?

Such questions suggest their own answers. We need to take the coronavirus seriously, but we should not panic. We are called to put our trust in the Lord, which is an act of *supernatural* faith. But we should not speak or act as if we have no concern at all about taking appropriate *natural* measures to prevent the spread of this illness.

The First Reading (Jer 17:5-10) [**for Mass on March 12th**](#) reveals an important truth about putting our faith in God during these anxious times. The Prophet Jeremiah speaks God’s word about the mortal danger faced by those who rely first upon natural, earthly solutions to life’s problems:

Thus says the LORD:
Cursed is the man who trusts in human beings,
who seeks his strength in flesh,
whose heart turns away from the LORD.
He is like a barren bush in the desert
that enjoys no change of season,
But stands in a lava waste,
a salt and empty earth.

Thinking only of earthly concerns and resources brings barrenness. Trusting in the Lord, the Prophet tells us, brings life and good fruit:

Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD,
whose hope is the LORD.
He is like a tree planted beside the waters
that stretches out its roots to the stream:
It fears not the heat when it comes,
its leaves stay green;
In the year of drought it shows no distress,
but still bears fruit.

We would be wrong, however, if we took God's word to mean that we can ignore the problems of this world because of our faith in God's promise concerning the world to come. On the contrary, our faith in God Who is love (1 Jn 4:8) inspires and motivates us to act for even the natural, earthly good of others.

Earthly problems and resources are never our top priority, but they are a necessary concern, properly subordinated to our faith in God and spiritual welfare. Therefore, our approach to a challenge like the coronavirus is to take the threat seriously and use all of the resources at our disposal to combat it, while always maintaining our trust in the Lord.

But what do we do when we find it hard to trust in the Lord? How do we handle the anxiety that sometimes overwhelms us at times like these? How do we gain the peace Jesus promises to His disciples? Here are some steps we can take to gain or maintain the peace of Christ:

- We begin by acknowledging our struggle. We should never be afraid to admit to God, ourselves, and others that we are struggling with anxiety. In fact, anxiety is a normal response to the dire warnings we find every day online, in newspapers, and on television. Pretending everything is okay will make it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to heal.
- Next, we need to *choose* trust in the Lord. Many people compound their anxiety by worrying about the fact that they don't *feel* like they trust God enough. While it is great to experience trust at an emotional level, it is not necessary. The point is that we *do* trust in God, however we feel. Trusting in God despite our anxious and doubtful feelings can often be a more powerful and profound act of trust.
- Pray. Our need to pray is such an obvious, yet easy-to-ignore, weapon against the threat of anxiety and fear. We need to spend time with the Lord in order to express and to strengthen His priority in our lives. When we're feeling anxious, it can be especially helpful to read Scripture prayerfully and spend quiet time meditating on what we've read and responding to God's word by entrusting our lives to Him. It can also help to pray our most beloved and familiar prayers, such as the Our Father and Hail Mary. The simplicity and familiarity of these prayers can be a great consolation when our hearts fill-up with fear and turmoil. An element of any prayer should be asking God's Holy Spirit to fill our hearts. Peace is a fruit of the Holy Spirit's presence within us.
- We need to make good use of *all* the resources at our disposal. We should consider our lives. Are there any natural causes of my anxiety over which I have some control? Am I getting enough sleep? Am I exercising? Could I spend more time with family and friends? Could I get outdoors more? Do I eat a healthy diet? Are there any environmental or lifestyle factors that could be addressed to help me have greater peace? Is my anxiety persistent or serious enough that I should consider seeing a doctor or therapist? If there has been any benefit to the explosion of cases of anxiety and depression in recent years,

it is that there is much more awareness of what helps us deal with these afflictions and that much of the stigma of seeking professional help has been eliminated.

Finally, we need to trust that God is truly with us. Jesus promised in Matthew 28, “I am with you always, until the end of the age.” The same Jesus who promises His peace to His disciples is with us at all times, especially in the Holy Eucharist. We need to trust in Him at all times, remembering that He is the King of the Universe and that His guiding hand directs our lives and the course of history in the way that is best for us and gives the most glory to His, and our, Heavenly Father.

Saint Francis de Sales beautifully expresses the unshakable trust in God we ought to have at all times in a book entitled, *The Golden Counsels of St. Francis de Sales*:

We must try to keep our hearts continually, unshakably serene through the vicissitudes of life. Even though everything turns and changes around us, we must ever remain steady—always looking, striving, and aspiring toward God. No matter what course the ship takes, no matter whether it sails to the east, west, north, or south, no matter what winds drive it on, the mariner’s needle never points in any direction except toward the polar star. Everything may be topsy-turvy, not only around us, but within us as well. But whether we are sad or happy, full of sweetness or bitterness, at peace or disturbed, filled with light or darkness, troubled or at rest, delighted or disgusted, experiencing aridity or consolation, scorched by the sun or refreshed by the dew—for all that, the fine point of our heart, our spirit, our higher will, which is our compass, must ever look and tend toward the love of God, its Creator, its Savior, its sole and sovereign good.

As Archbishop Vigneron often says, if God can bring good out of the murder of the Son of God, He can bring good out of any difficulties we face. The Cross of Christ, the instrument by which the worst act imaginable was committed, has become the instrument of our salvation.

We should always trust that God can bring good out of the threat we face in the coronavirus and every other challenge of our lives. God loves us more than we can possibly imagine, and He wants to give us every good thing we need, especially that which is most good, all-good, the gift of Himself.

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