

WELCOME HOME!
BY FR. JAMES KURZYNSKI

How quickly things change. Never has this simple statement been more true than with Covid-19. When I left for sabbatical, I presumed that it would be you saying to me, "Welcome home Father!" I never would have imagined that it would be me welcoming you home. In short, 2020 is quickly becoming a year we all would like to forget.

At the same time, this desire to forget cannot bleed into an attitude of turning 2020 into a year to avoid. Covid-19 is real and dangerous. It has touched the lives of many. My father became gravely ill with Covid-19 symptoms. Thankfully, he recovered, but two other people close to me did not. I have learned the hard way how deadly and devastating this disease can be.

This is the backdrop that led the Bishops of the United States to suspend the celebration of Sunday Mass. The last time this occurred was in 1918 during the Spanish flu pandemic. This reminds us that, though rare, the suspension of Sunday Mass is not unprecedented in Church history. The claim some are making that this is the Church bending to the state is simply false. The decision was made with the Church's teaching on the dignity of the human person at the forefront: Life is sacred from conception to natural death and every point in between.

It is this ethic that also is at the forefront of opening St. Olaf Parish. Bishop Callahan has laid out for all parishes a pathway to return to celebrating Mass. The staff and I had an initial meeting last week to discuss what reopening will look like. This week, we will do a walkthrough of our new parameters. Once we feel confident, we will invite our liturgical ministers to participate in a similar walk through to discuss these changes. Once we feel ready, we will submit our request to the Diocese to begin the public celebration of Mass again.

This leads to a logical question, "When will we be allowed to return to Mass?" There is no definite date the Diocese has set. Rather, it is a combination of meeting new expectations for sanitation and health combined with the confidence of the parish that those expectations can be met. Here is a brief list of some of the new provisions.

Parishes are allowed to celebrate Mass with 25% of building capacity.
Parishioners over 70 or who have underlying health issues are asked to stay home.
Social distancing must be observed (with the exception of families) in the pews.
This sign of peace will be suspended
People will be asked to leave the Church building immediately after Mass has concluded.

These provisions will be challenging, especially at a parish that is known for its close knit nature. However, these temporary changes, which I will lay out in greater detail in the weeks ahead, are necessary to protect all of us. Our hope is to begin public Mass the weekend of June 13-14. The reason for this is twofold: One, to give us time to train our liturgical ministers in a way that makes them feel confident and safe; and, two, to see what Covid-19 does. It sadly does not surprise me that as the state is opening after the Wisconsin Supreme Court's decision that we are seeing a statewide increase of Covid-19 cases. I do not want to create a scenario where we open too quickly and have a "start up/shut down" scenario unfold.

Lastly, another question on all of our minds is, "When will this end?" The hard answer to this question is: I don't know. Until a vaccine or effective treatment is found for Covid-19, we will be need to live with a new vigilance. Pray for a cure. Pray for patience. Pray for peace. And let us stay close in spirit though we find ourselves physically distant from one another.