

By Bishop Thomas Zinkula

“May you live in interesting times” is an ancient curse which refers to periods in history that are filled with tumult and upheaval. We certainly are living in interesting times right now.

The decision to cancel the public celebration of the holy Mass in our diocese due to the coronavirus was not an easy one. It made me very sad, since the Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life. As Deacon Frank Agnoli puts it in a companion article, “To go without the Eucharist is hard, even painful. This is a gut-wrenching Lenten fast.”

I like to say that God can squeeze grace out of these kinds of situations, out of our interesting times. God can turn them on their head. That is the message of the Paschal Mystery, which we are preparing to commemorate at the end of Lent. God squeezed our salvation out of the suffering, death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus.

During this Eucharistic fast, I encourage the faithful of the diocese to consider the notion of “spiritual Communion” – a fervent desire to receive Jesus into one’s heart and soul when one can’t receive him in sacramental Communion – which is an ancient practice of the Church.

Recently, after praying the Angelus, Pope Francis said: “In this situation of pandemic, in which we find ourselves living more or less isolated, we are invited to rediscover and deepen the value of the Communion that unites all the members of the Church.”

We will find our way through these challenging times together. Although Communion isn’t available at this time, and we can’t be in close physical communion with one another, we are mystically united in the Communion of Saints, which we proclaim as a core tenet of our faith every time we make a profession of faith.

I was struck by these words of encouragement that were tweeted by a rabbi to the members of his synagogue. His main point is to think of “social distancing” in the exact opposite way.

“Every hand that we don’t shake must become a phone call that we place. Every embrace that we avoid must become a verbal expression of warmth and concern. Every inch and every foot that we physically place between ourselves and another must become a thought as to how we might be of help to that other, should the need arise Let’s stay safe. And let’s draw one another closer in a way that we’ve never done before.”

In other words, “social distancing” is not “spiritual distancing.” We are called to care for one another, now more than ever. In a recent interview, Pope Francis said, “We must rediscover the concreteness of little things, small gestures of attention we can offer those close to us, our family, our friends.”

May our hunger for the Lord’s Real Presence grow dramatically during this time and may we share that hunger with others. May the Holy Spirit transform our social distancing into a greater unity of faith and oneness in the Lord. And as we read in the Scripture over and over again, may we: “Be not afraid.”