New Blackfriars

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Comment *AGREEING ON COVID-19*

People who self-identify as Roman Catholics often disagree with each other these days. Some read the bible as literally true in all of its verses. Others do not. Some approve of Pope Francis. Others do not. Some think that there is a best way for mass to be celebrated. Others do not. One might, however, have hoped that all Catholics would by now have substantially agreed with each other when it comes to dealing with the Covid-19 virus. But they have not. While some have respected ways of behaving recommended by many national and local medical experts and political leaders (not to mention religious ones), others have taken a different line.

Some have argued that Covid is not a serious health problem and should be thought of as akin to influenza. Others have said that acting on social distancing guidelines by closing churches is to embrace what is transitory as opposed to what is eternal. On this account, we should prefer nothing to the love of God as expressed in church and with everything being liturgically as normal while the virus has its way. Some have claimed that religious leaders acting on medical social distancing guidelines are encouraging a diabolically inspired fear of death. Others have said that to wear a mask during the Covid epidemic is an act of theological cowardice.

When it comes to whether or not the Covid virus exists as a serious and unusual health threat, the scientific evidence seems to be clear. Covid is definitely out there. It is pretty much everywhere and is different from influenza. It is also highly contagious and able to cause serious damage to people of all ages. As I write this Comment (on July 8, 2020), the infection rate has gone down in the E.U. But it is seriously spiking in North America. Current scientific projections indicate that the Covid-caused death toll in the U.S. will exceed 200,000 by November of this year. Australia (with a good record on dealing with Covid) is currently reimposing lock down measures in Melbourne and other parts of Australia's Victoria state following a record daily rise of coronavirus cases. Doctors worldwide are saying that Covid is most certainly something to worry about for a long time to come. Harvard University has now decreed that all of its teaching during the academic year 2020–2021 shall be conducted remotely, with professors interacting with students only by computer. Think about that decision as coming from one of the world's most distinguished universities.

When it comes to how Christians have responded to disease in the past, we should note that Catholic pastors have often closed churches

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down for fear of contagion. In 1576–1577 St. Charles Borromeo shut down the churches in Milan because of a plague while making arrangements for out of door services. And the Catholic Church has always laid emphasis on the common good and the role of those in public (or religious) office to strive for it inside or outside church buildings. You may think that striving for the common good means focusing exclusively on economic matters. But a thriving economy depends on there being healthy people. As for the point about masks and theological cowardice, the obvious reply would seem to be "Remain as courageous as you like, but also take care not to infect those around you for your lack of wearing a mask".

New York State, which had the most dismal Covid statistics in March 2020, now has the best when compared to most of the rest of the USA. Amazingly, New York (including the densely populated borough of Manhattan) is currently one of safest places to be in the States these days. Why? Because the Governor of the state tried rigorously to deal with virus crisis drawing on the best scientific evidence when it comes to how the disease spreads. While facing some serious criticism, he took major steps to "lock down" the entire State. But that policy proved to be very successful, and the State is now carefully reopening gradually, and on a regional basis, with no rise in its infection rate.

It is not that Covid is not prowling around New York State as I write. But it seems to be much more under control there than it is in many other states in the Union. In some of these, governors have acted and legislated while assuming that financial reasons for ignoring the Covid threat should be preferred to scientifically motivated behaviour designed to keep everyone as healthy as possible (on the "every life counts" principle). Not surprisingly, this policy has resulted in a sharp rise in infection. So, many states in the USA are now reversing their opening decisions.

There will doubtless be many Catholics, and Christians of other denominations, who object to such steps. There will be blogs and videos and tweets claiming that they are not what God wants. But if God does not want us to take all possible steps based on scientific evidence to protect ourselves and others from what is obviously a natural disaster, then God would not seem to be what the Church has traditionally taken God to be.

Brian Davies, O.P.

After twenty five years as Editor of *New Blackfriars*, Fr. Fergus Kerr O.P. has now retired from that position. He is succeeded by Fr. Brian Davies O.P. He will, however, serve on the Editorial Board.

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