

Archbishop Smith: “We’re All in this Together”

These were the words spoken to me by the nurse, who administered my test for the COVID-19 virus. (The result was negative.) Having self-isolated on the advice of my doctor, I went when called to a site designated for the testing. There I found myself with many other people awaiting the assessment. It was a long wait, but nobody seemed to mind. More than once the medical professionals thanked us for our patience. My reaction, and that of everyone else, I’m sure, was that it was we who should be thanking them! Our healthcare folks are working long hours and striving with great effort and strong determination to protect us and stop the spread of the coronavirus. They deserve from us a loud and collective shout-out for all they do. It was when I expressed my personal thanks to the nurse (after she thanked me – again – for being patient) that she said, “Well, we’re all in this together, aren’t we.”

And she’s right – in more ways than one. “We’re all in this together” refers, in its immediate context, to our collective efforts to protect ourselves and one another from the disease. Taken more broadly, the phrase also encapsulates the truth of our common humanity and the consequent duty incumbent upon us at all times to care for one another and serve the common good. In fact, if we think about it, what we are discovering in the former sense of the phrase contains some important lessons for all of us with respect to the latter. Here I will highlight three.

Healthy Interactions

Hand sanitizer, anyone? Health officials are teaching us many important practices to adopt so as to stop the spread of infection. We are to wash our hands often, each time for 20 seconds (about the length of time it takes to pray the Our Father, by the way). We are to avoid touching eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands; cover coughs and sneezes with tissue, which is then discarded; avoid sharing household items; and so on. In these ways, we are told, we contribute to halting the spread of the infection.

Our interactions could do with serious purification on another level, too. For example, we need to cleanse social media thoroughly of the vitriol, gossip and slander that foster the rapid spread of societal division. It is of great importance, too, to purify our vision of the human being that equates dignity with beauty, wealth, achievement or utility. The propagation of this falsehood infects the mind and leads to distorted and harmful self-assessments, which in turn can give rise to destructive behaviours.

Social Distancing

This phrase has entered into our daily discourse. We are advised to keep our

distance from one another so that the virus has less chance to spread. This is good “social distancing”, undertaken out of concern for ourselves and our neighbour.

Perhaps this practice can lead us to focus on bad forms of social distancing. The maladies of racism, bigotry, fear or indifference estrange us from one another. These are viruses whose diffusion we can defeat by simply learning to regard and honour one another as human subjects worthy of respect, and brothers and sisters united in our common humanity.

The Gift of Authority

Here in Alberta we are blessed with the Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Deena Hinshaw, who is leading us through this health crisis. Clear, calm, measured, and decisive, she inspires trust in the citizens of this province. We have full confidence in her expertise, and willingly submit to following her directives.

Deferral to the authority of another tends not to come easily to anyone who as a matter of course is directed instead by self-will. In fact, the authority of the Self is increasingly promoted as the only reliable guide. What we are learning (I hope!) from our common deferral to medical expertise is the need collectively to defer to the Ultimate Authority, who is always worthy of our trust: God. No one is all-knowing. No human being is exempt from weakness and limit. Deferral only to the Self is foolhardy. The wise are those who recognize the need for external authority in their lives. The happy are those who find that in God and follow His directives.

Lent is the sacred time in which we can re-discover our need for God and, through repentance, submit once again to His authority. By doing as God commands, we shall see how we must cleanse our unhealthy interactions and overcome our self-imposed distances so as to pursue together the common good of all.