

Prudence Is the Key Word

Whether and when to relax the coronavirus lockdown has become the big political talking point across Europe, the United States and elsewhere. All have imposed social distancing rules and banned any sort of gathering, such as in offices, factories, shops, restaurants, theatres and sports stadiums. And churches. In every case the rate of spread of the virus in the general population has effectively been reduced to the point where the disease can be said to be contained.

The key word here is “prudence”, which means assessing the risks and making a carefully balanced judgement. Part of the impetus to relax the lockdown comes from commerce and industry, where the economic damage has already been massive. Many jobs have been lost, and some businesses could be extinguished altogether, making it much harder to revive the economy after the lockdown is over. And a functioning economy is necessary to pay for [government aid to businesses and individuals], and all the other functions of government.

Some of the clamor for immediate relaxation comes from libertarians, who resent any interference by the state in their freedom to act. And part comes from conservative voices who want to restore as much as possible of the status quo ante. They include some Catholics who are dismayed by the suspension of public Masses and want the suspension lifted so parish life can resume. They are unwise. The epidemic is ready to explode again if given the slightest chance, and human lives would be put at risk. To save life is a moral obligation under the Fifth Commandment.

The increasing pressure to relax the lockdown now rather than to wait is not coming primarily from ordinary people, who have complied with the restrictions on their freedom to a degree that has surprised politicians and behavioral psychologists. That suggests one possible route ahead in the coming weeks – to make social distancing voluntary where possible, rather than a legal requirement.

It is clear that there are enterprises that can function with social distancing in place. Supermarkets and [pharmacies] are the obvious examples. The principle of one-in one-out creates queues at the door, with queuers responsibly spacing themselves to preserve a [six foot] separation. This would allow the phased reopening of garden centres, clothes shops and other businesses. They could insist on face masks if they thought it necessary. Though it is too soon for anything like organized worship in large groups to be prudent, social distancing and one-in one-out could allow parish churches to be open for a time each day for individual prayer, and perhaps for small funerals.

Nevertheless most discussions of lifting lockdown are based on a false premise, namely that a declining number of cases in the general population means the outbreak is under control, and eventually the public can forget about it. That will not happen until an effective vaccine is widely available. What is being achieved instead is merely suppression, with a new flare-up, the so-called second spike, a constant threat.