

April 26, 2020

Dear Parishioners,

You know that line, "Behind every cloud there's a silver lining"? I think I may have found one connected with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Last week the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel carried a story headlined: "Pollution clears during lockdown, possibly saving lives." The article asserted that over the past few weeks air pollution has dropped by 30% in big cities in the Northeast – Washington, DC, Philadelphia, New York City and Boston – because people have been staying home and driving so much less than before. Similar drops in nitrogen dioxide levels (that's the gas which is created when fossil fuels are burned) were noted in Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Detroit and Buffalo. The same thing happened in China and Italy during their coronavirus lockdowns. The article went on to say:

*. . . In the Northeast, March 2020 showed the lowest monthly atmospheric nitrogen dioxide levels of any March on record, which spans the past 15 years. Last month, pollution reductions were noted in countries hit hard by the coronavirus, including China and Italy. This led to speculation that the virus had actually saved more lives than it took. According to one [source] of the University of Leicester, "the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that about 3 million people die each year from ailments caused by air pollution and that more than 80% of people living in urban areas are exposed to air quality levels that exceed safe limits.' Stanford University's [scientist] also noted in March that 'the reductions in air pollution in China caused by this economic disruption likely saved 20 times more lives than have currently been lost due to infection with the virus in that country.'*

Now, I am not in any way suggesting that the deaths arising from the COVID-19 pandemic are not as devastating and tragic as they are numerous. Nor do I mean to imply that somehow the world-wide economic disruption caused by lockdowns brought on by the pandemic will not be all too deadly in its short-term and long-term consequences. But I am saying that the pandemic will end – maybe not this week or even next month, but it will end. And when it does, we will find ourselves facing the same realities we were looking at before social distancing, personal protective equipment and toilet paper became the things vying for our attention. One of those realities is our environment.

Last week, we marked the fiftieth anniversary of Earth Day, the occasion associated with the beginning of the modern environmental movement. Over those fifty years, many steps have been taken to protect our environment, clean our waterways, save endangered species, and promote green space. But more – much more – needs to be done. The story I shared above about the decrease in nitrogen dioxide points to the truth that human behaviors can have a tremendous impact for good or ill on our environment.

I came across of wonderful quote, attributed to Chief Seattle, on Earth Day: "We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children." What sort of ecologically good things might we resolve to pass back to our children in a post-pandemic world?



Fr. Philip D. Reifenberg, Pastor