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Christian Love in the Face of COVID-19: The Ethics of Staying Home

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A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:34-35)

Our primary ethical obligation as Christians is to love one another as Christ loved us. We have the gift of Holy Tradition, including scripture and the lives of the saints, to guide us in understanding what this means in our daily lives.

Christian love calls for charity and almsgiving: “whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?” (1 John 3:17)

Christian love calls for sacrificial giving: “Now Jesus sat opposite the treasury and saw how the people put money into the treasury. And many who were rich put in much. Then one poor widow came and threw in two mites, which make a quadrans. So He called His disciples to Himself and said to them, “Assuredly, I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all those who have given to the treasury; for they all put in out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all that she had, her whole livelihood” (Mark 12:41–44).

Christians love extends to strangers: “Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; sick and

you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.’ Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You? And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.’” (Matthew 25: 34-40)

Christian love calls us to respect, protect, and preserve our bodies and those of others: As Christians we should not value earthly existence above all else nor should we attempt to extend life at all costs or be obsessed with our health. Our bodies, however, are gifts from God. As St. Paul reminds us, we are called to respect, protect, and preserve them because they are not our own: “Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

What does it mean to love others as Christ loved in the face of the COVID-19 Pandemic?

Some of our ethical duties as Christians are self-evident. Many people are suffering economically as business shutter and they lose their incomes. We are called to give sacrificially and to increase our almsgiving as we are able. We are called to pray. We also are called to protect and preserve health.

Facts alone cannot tell us what we ought to do, yet we must be properly informed to know how to protect and preserve health in the face of this pandemic. Insofar as medical advice does not call on us to violate God’s commands, it is appropriate for Christians to turn to medical professionals for guidance. While he warned that we should not put all our hope in physicians, St. Basil the Great praised medicine as a gift from God: “Each of the arts is God’s gift to us, remedying the deficiencies of nature.....the medical art was given to us to relieve the sick, in some degree at least” (Question 55 in The Long Rules).

Based on the recent experiences in other countries and the evolving situation in the United States, the virus is likely to spread rapidly without robust measures to combat it. Some people carrying the virus might never develop symptoms yet be contagious, and some people might be contagious before they become symptomatic. This makes it impossible to prevent the spread of disease merely

by asking people who feel sick to isolate themselves. While most people recover from the virus, some groups are particularly at risk of dying from it, including older individuals and people with a number of underlying health conditions. Recent information suggests that children might be at more risk than previously thought. Among those who recover, many will require significant medical care. The projected infection rates would pose a serious threat to our health care infrastructure, risking the lives not only of people with COVID-19 but with any other condition that requires medical attention. Straining our health care system also increases the risks health care professionals face. In the absence of an effective and widely used vaccine, the most effective way to prevent the spread of COVID-19 is to eliminate as much as possible close contact (less than 6 feet apart) among persons.

With the exception of people who must venture out for truly essential activities, we can show Christ's love by voluntarily staying home to protect and preserve our God-given bodies and the health of others. This includes staying home from church services. While receiving the Eucharist itself poses no threat, by being in church we increase risk to ourselves and others, both those who are present and others with whom those present will come into contact.

It is often through our presence that we show love, yet today our Christian ethical obligation is to show love through our physical absence. We can be "present" in other ways through our prayers, phone calls, texts, emails and video chat technology.