

## **FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT, YEAR A (29 March 2020)**

### **A reflection of the Lenten path accompanied by the coronavirus as a pandemic**

#### **We are grateful for the prompt response of solidarity to the Bishop's Lenten call**

In the Catholic Church, on February 27, Ash Wednesday, we begin the time of preparation to live the Lord's Easter of this year 2020. But, as in most dioceses of Japan, from the next day, in the face of the spread of coronavirus, the diocese of Saitama as well, after consulting the diocesan council, I have decided that no masses should be held in public in our parishes until Saturday, March 14.

I believe that we gradually became aware of the dangers of this new virus that continues to spread every day throughout the continents of the world and now even in Africa. When it was found that covid-19 had spread to more than 114 countries and killed more than 4,000 people, WHO (World Health Organization) declared the new coronavirus (covid-19) as a PANDEMIC. It was on Wednesday, 11 of March.

#### **But there have been some cases of unmindful priests: voices of concern arrive**

Neither the Bishop nor any priest of the diocesan council were acting as a spy to detect the offenders of the diocesan disposition, but voices of real concern have arrived from the People of God, because some priests have interpreted with some pastoral lightness the Bishop's disposition and have continued to celebrate Sunday masses, within the parish temple, with the participation of some faithful.

Clearly, a group of faithful, expressed their concern, not only because they disobeyed the Bishop, but in the event that some people who participated in those celebrations would be contaminated with coronavirus, neither that parish priest nor the Bishop would be able to assume the responsibility of the misunderstanding; and even less being able to cure it.

Certainly, these priests, without sufficient awareness of the gravity of their actions, have acted recklessly as tempting God. But, most of the priests and lay people of our diocese, have lamented greatly saying that, in this situation as well as on other occasions, obedience to the Pastor of the diocese is always more important, which is the sign of ecclesial unity in communion with the Pope.

#### **New call to live the Lenten spirit and the diocesan unity**

Since we started this Lenten journey until today, almost five weeks have passed and there have been 5 letters from the Bishop, the fourth one was especially for the priests. And, on Wednesday, March 25, I convened the diocesan council again to review the situation of the country and our Kanto region to which we belong and to prepare the arrangements for the celebration of the Holy Week. For this, Pope Francis, through those responsible for the dicasteries of the Holy See, have sent precise rules to celebrate the Easter Triduo, but leaving to the bishops of each diocese the adequacy and application of these provisions.

### **Data of the situation in Japan**

Throughout this month, following the provision of the national government, all primary and secondary schools as well as in most dioceses in Japan, have suspended all activities to prevent the spread of coronavirus infection. Through the news in various media, we can continue to inform ourselves of how this pandemic is spreading and destroying. For you and I, it is our first time to experience a pandemic. In Japan, if we continue this way, those contaminated will geometrically increase. Only last Wednesday, there have been 96 people infected. In Tokyo, next to Saitama, 421 infected were registered, more than the double of the previous day, which added in total 212 people in the capital alone. Thus, in all Japan, as of 22:00 hours on March 25, there were 1,307 infected in 41 of the 47 prefectures, which together with the passengers and crew of the Diamond Princes Cruise, give a total of 2,019 infected. In addition, the Ministry of Health reported 33 confirmed cases at the quarantine stations at Japan's international airports. The number of people who died is already 55 and 66 serious ill people.

### **"Coronavirus: A War against an Enemy that we do not See"**

Of the many articles of authorized voices in infectious diseases, I found very illuminating what Dr. Aileen Marty has expressed with that title of coronavirus. I quote only a few stronger words: "If the authorities do not implement drastic measures and the population is not aware of the severity, it will remain an unprecedented disaster around the world. *In addition the virus can enter anyone's body, no matter how old they are. The problem here is whether or not that person is going to manifest the symptoms and at what levels. Studies have so far shown that only 3% of people age 18 and younger develop severe or critical symptoms. That is, it is not that the rest do not become infected, but that they have light symptoms and do not require to be hospitalized. The serious thing about these asymptomatic people is that by not knowing that they are infected they continue to spread the virus, and infect those who do may be at risk of losing their lives. That's why it is so important that children and young people do not expose themselves.*"

### **Reading this situation enlightened by the Word of God on the Fifth Sunday of Lent**

All men and women who are currently living (the world population is approximately 7,773,452,800). It is the first time that we have faced a very invisible enemy that is very dangerous to the human's health: the new coronavirus-covid 19. And that's why, we too, Catholics around the world who are about 1,254 million and represent 17.7% of the world's population, have to live a holy week and a very special Easter time since we will celebrate it using the social media (online), but others, are probably quarantined or are also in solitude.

Rather than seeing it only as an "apocalyptic enemy" let us make a spiritual reflection, that is, what is it that God, the Lord of history, wants to tell us with this tragic world situation that surprised us all?

To this end, I invite you to read carefully the first reading of the Mass of the Fifth Sunday of Lent and to reflect, personally and as a family: what is God asking of humanity and his Church in the face of this pandemic?

- 1) *Ezekiel 37.12-14: In the face of the pain of those who die on foreign soil, the prophet comforts them by saying, "He himself will draw his people from the graves, open their tombs, and bring them back to the beloved land of Israel. Then His people will know that God is the Lord when He pours out His Spirit abundantly upon the survivors."*
- 2) *John 11.1-45 – The Evangelist speaks of the "reviviscence" of Lazarus, narrates the last of the seven "signs" or "works" that constitutes the framework of the fourth gospel. According to John, before facing death, Jesus manifests Himself as Lord of life, declares in public that He is the resurrection and life, that those who die by faith in Him will live again, that those who believe in Him will not die forever." John presents this fact as the one who pours out the drop that breaks the patience of Jesus' enemies, who by this miracle will decide to kill Jesus. After this fact we will begin holy week celebrating Jesus' entry to Jerusalem (Palm Sunday).*