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The Dedication of the Basilica of
Saints Peter and Paul

Your home is a holy place; worship the Lord there

Dear faithful of the Diocese of Oakland:

When I was based at the US Navy submarine base in Bangor, Washington, from time to time a sailor would come to my office at the chapel. "Father Barber, our boat is going out, and I need some Catholic materials."

"Oh," I'd say. "Where are you going?"

"Sorry, that's classified."

"Okay," I'd reply. "How long will you be gone?"

"Sorry, I can't tell you," he'd say.

"What's your mission?" I would push.

"Father, I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you."

He smiled, like Tom Cruise in "Top Gun."

Then I would give him a dozen rosaries, with leaflets on how to say the rosary. I would give him a supply of Sunday missalettes, St. Christopher medals and holy water. I also gave him a link to Father Robert Barron's "Word on Fire" website, so he could download in advance sermons for the Sundays they would be underway. With these materials, the senior Catholic sailor or officer onboard would be authorized by the Commanding Officer to conduct an informal worship service for the Catholic crewmembers "in the absence of a priest."

Something like that is possible now in our homes because of the COVID-19 lockdown. We just heard this week that Governor Gavin Newsom has halted indoor worship services in 41 California counties, including Alameda and Contra Costa. This comes as a blow, as we were just getting used to going back to indoor Mass, while taking all the precautions. Now we have to move back outdoors, not easy in the coming winter months, or have livestream Mass, or both.

It's the "yo-yo" effect that is particularly frustrating. I believe the reasons the governor gives are sound. Hospitals are at 75% capacity right now. Infection cases are rising. Italy, France, England and parts of the United States are seeing a resurgence of infections, sickness and rising deaths. All are good reasons for Church leadership to follow advice of health professionals to keep all our parishioners safe.

For the greater glory of God

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Yet that does not mean we are reduced to “nothing.” The first church any of us belong to is the “domestic church” -- meaning the church of our own homes. This was stressed when I was a kid. Our teachers at my Catholic school -- mostly nuns -- had a campaign asking our families to pray the rosary together nightly at home. “The family that prays together, stays together,” the Sisters said, echoing Father Patrick Peyton, the “Rosary Priest.” My own family was not particularly religious, but I remember us saying the rosary together as a whole family at least for some weeks.

The Mormon Church has a laudable practice called “Family Home Evening,” where outside activities take second place to all the family staying home one night a week for prayer and discussion of family issues. Maybe it’s time we Catholics rediscover the “domestic church” of our own homes. Do you have a place in your home for the crucifix or the image of Our Lady is placed? Maybe you could pray together before or after participating in a livestream Mass? Maybe you could make a small home altar, with some statues of Christ, Our Lady or your favorite saints? You could write out and place your urgent prayer requests under the feet of the saints. Pope Francis does that with his “Sleeping St. Joseph” statue. I have so many prayer needs, I have two of those statues.

In this time of frustration, trials of patience, and even sickness and death, let’s not lose hope. Hope is the hallmark of the Christian. Bring the holiness of God from your parish church into your own home. Your home is a holy place. Worship the Lord there. The first Christians were not free to come together for Mass and worship openly, so they gathered in “home churches.” Maybe we can learn from our Catholic sailors in the submarines on months-long underwater deployments, and come together as best we can to recognize Christ in our midst.

And take courage from St. Paul, who certainly endured worse hardships than us. But his suffering, his carrying the cross, only made his faith stronger. “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom 8:38-39).

With the assurance of my continued prayers and blessing, I am

Yours sincerely in Christ,



The Most Reverend Michael C. Barber, S.J.
Bishop of Oakland