



Spiritual First Aid for a Virtual Community: Stronger Together While Physically Apart

Josephine Lombardi ©2020

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I am writing as a concerned Catholic, expressing some thoughts on the current crisis, not intending to be an expert on all things spiritual and emotional. If my thoughts give a little bit of encouragement to someone who is worried, I give thanks to God. The proposed model is not to be used to assess anyone who is in spiritual and/or mental distress. These steps I'm proposing are not meant to replace the sacraments or the need for mental health resources/therapy. If you are experiencing mental distress please contact your physician or the national mental health hotline 1888 429 8167 for mental health emergencies or visit www.mentalhealthcommission.ca. Catholic Family Services, if such an agency is available in your diocese, offers on-line/phone support as well.

Missing the fullness of our Church experience

Many of us are missing the fullness of our Church experience: attending mass and receiving sacraments, praying with others and sharing our faith experience when we gather and worship in community.

So many of us have experienced an emotional roller coaster during these last five weeks, feeling hopeful one day, discouraged the next. I pray some of you might benefit from these proposed steps on ***Spiritual First Aid***. A simple on-line definition of first aid tells us that first aid is the "help given to a sick or injured person until full medication treatment is available." Let's apply this to our current situation: I'm defining ***Spiritual First Aid as the help given to a discouraged person until the fullness of our Church experience returns, including the reception of the sacraments, daily and Sunday worship***. If a participant finds these steps helpful, they can continue to use them along with other spiritual resources available to us.

Let's get started...

I'm proposing we use **VICTORY** as our acronym for ***Spiritual First Aid***, using this together with other spiritual and therapeutic aids might help us build endurance and resilience during this difficult time. There are seven actions. You may wish to study one step per day or as many as needed.

FIRST ACTION:

Vent: It might be helpful to share your fears, worries, anxieties or concerns with a trusted loved one, spouse, therapist, spiritual director, pastor or friend. Name what you are feeling and include God in the conversation:

"I feel distressed.

I am worried about my kids who have lost their jobs.

I am worried about people who are sick and suffering.

I am worried about my elective surgery that has been postponed.

I am concerned about shut-ins and seniors who are in long term care facilities or

other retirement residences.
I am worried about the future.
I fear for health care workers.
I am afraid I will get sick.
Will there be jobs after the pandemic slows down?
Will I lose my small or large business?
I'm angry about the current crisis.
I am worried about people who are feeling isolated and alone.
I miss family dinners and hugs.
I'm feeling lonely.
What if a loved one dies during this time?
Will we be able to worship together at mass
Will I ever go back to school?"

These are mere suggestions. We need to give ourselves permission to vent in a safe, protected environment, using self-control and reason to regulate our expression of emotion. This means being prudent when it comes to self-expression, meaning an on line forum might not be the best platform for the expression of personal thoughts and feelings. The fruit of such activity might be more fear, anxiety and division. We don't want that! We want the outcome to be the fruits of the Holy Spirit, not more anxiety, possibly leading to combative conversations. Remember, fear and anxiety are not fruits of the Holy Spirit—honest! Check out Galatians chapter 5:22-26. Although some of these emotions can lead to more distress, the expression of righteous anger can help us to express our concerns.

St. Paul says, "Be angry but do not sin," (Eph. 4:26).

Dr. Gabor Maté has researched the benefits of expressing our feelings in a healthy, safe context. It is okay to be angry as long as your expression of anger is not hurting anyone, including yourself. It might be helpful to keep this in mind when it comes to your loved ones. Allow your friends and family the time to vent as needed. When reaching out to loved ones don't be afraid to ask, "How are you feeling?" After they express their thoughts, you can express empathy by repeating back what you have heard, "I'm sorry to hear you are feeling isolated, afraid, and alone. I'm here for you, listening and praying for you." So in a nutshell, vent, but do not sin!

SECOND ACTION

Investigate your thoughts and examine your fears. The correction of perception is an important part of the spiritual journey. The most repeated advice in scripture is "Do not be afraid." In the New Testament, Mary hears these words from the Angel Gabriel at the annunciation. St. Joseph hears these words, encouraging him to stand with Mary and support her. The shepherds, representing the most humble among us, hear these words along with the two apostles at the transfiguration. The Hebrew Scriptures contain the same advice: "He will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged," (Deuteronomy 31:3; 20:1). There is a deep connection between the power of the Holy Spirit and the ability to overcome fear. St. John the Baptist had courage, a gift of the Holy Spirit, because he was filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. Mary did not fear because she was "full of grace", full of God's strengthening power. We cannot have courage without this gift of power, without the power of love, the power of reason, and the power of truth. Saint John Paul II was intimately aware of this power when he encouraged his fellow Poles to not be afraid, words of advice that often come before the start of a great mission or a shift in personal journeys.

Sometimes fear keeps us from being rational and perceiving correctly. When you find yourself being afraid, worried, or anxious, ask yourself, "How do I know what I am feeling is true?" You might want to consider asking yourself this question if you find yourself saying things like, "This situation will never end. There is no hope for our future." St. Augustine taught, (my paraphrase) "where love increases, fear decreases." Similarly, 1 John 4:18 reminds us "perfect love casts out fear."

Whenever you feel afraid, try to discipline your thoughts and focus on love or expressing love to someone in need. Perceived fears can make us irrational and paralyze our ability to think clearly. Pray for the grace to stay in the present moment, disciplining your thoughts as they start to distract you with worry. There is so much information being circulated and fact checking can help us stay anchored in the truth. Our ability to reason and to love can help us cast out fear. St. Paul used Roman imagery to communicate the mysteries of our faith. He was a Roman citizen and appealed to his heritage from time to time to express spiritual insights. When writing about the theological virtues, faith, hope and charity, he encourages us to think about faith and charity as a breastplate for the heart and hope as a helmet for the mind. He calls hope the helmet of salvation. Salvation can be defined as divine health, the restoration of the image and likeness of God in the person. The word *salus* in Latin means both health and salvation. God wants us to be well, for our minds to be well. Put on your armor before you investigate your thinking. St. Paul says, "Put on the mind of Christ," (Philippians 2:5-8). Pray for the gift of thinking thoughts inspired by the Holy Spirit, God's truth. Jesus taught us not to worry. It is a key teaching in his sermon on the mount. ***Worry cannot change anything, but prayer can.***

THIRD ACTION

Christ-centred connection: God is love and Jesus is God incarnate, meaning he is love incarnate. He is perfect love, fully human and divine, revealing himself to us wherever there is love. We are in the season of Easter, a season of hope, celebrating the light conquering the darkness, where all pain is vindicated and our sorrow redeemed. Jesus is the source of our salvation, the source of our divine health and restoration. Moreover, His name means, "God saves." During the storm at sea, when his friends yell out, "Save us!" he tells his friends to stay focused on him, trusting him with their worries and concerns. Trusting, believing, and knowing Jesus helps us to stay focused on Him. This means we are not meant to struggle alone. The great temptation that comes with thoughts of despair is the temptation to believe that we are alone when we are suffering. Jesus is waiting for us to ask for help, honouring our free will. Ask for help and stay focused on him during a time of crisis.

Stay close to Christ-centred people, people who communicate his love and goodness. 1 John 4:4 reminds us that Christ within us is greater than any evil or crisis that is in the world. Jesus promised he is with us, especially "where two or three are gathered..." (Matthew 18:20). The lover needs a beloved, for where there is love, there is God (1 John 4:8). Spiritual and emotional intimacy is key to surviving this time of physical isolation. Dr. John Cacioppo, a professor at the University of Chicago, has studied the science of loneliness. Check out his Ted talk here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_0hxl03JoA0. Dr. Cacioppo has discovered that ***loneliness is harder on the body than smoking, drinking, and obesity.*** Please reach out to others with a phone call, text, or email. Pray with one another and encourage one another. In the Parable of the Judgment of Nations, Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me," (Matthew 25:40). Certain members of the Body of Christ are vulnerable and need those of us who staff Christ's "field hospital" to minister to them. Let us be mindful of the dignity of all people, especially the lonely and the isolated, those who have no one to speak for them. Ask for help if you need it and we must do our best to make sure the dignity of the vulnerable is maintained during these challenging times.

FOURTH ACTION

Truth, goodness, and beauty: These are attributes of God's being. They are transcendentals, meaning each attribute, rooted in God's being, transcends our understanding of space and time. Think of a time when you were enjoying a season of plenty—falling in love, loving your job, making new friends, worshipping with a community of faith, listening to sacred music, enjoying a vacation with scenic vistas, or enjoying a wonderful party with great food and fellowship. My guess is you didn't want the time to end, and when it was over, you thought to yourself, "Where did the time go? Five hours felt like five minutes." These moments can be like a foretaste of heaven. Heaven is beyond our understanding of space and time, meaning it is timeless and without boundaries. Understanding our desire to know and serve God, Jesus taught us the Lord's Prayer, beginning with these words, "Our Father who art in heaven..." Exposing yourself to truth, goodness, and beauty can facilitate a foretaste of heaven, an encounter with God, and might alleviate some of the discouragement or worry you are feeling. We tend to be more present focused when we are enjoying ourselves, among other enjoyable activities, doing the things we love—teaching, dancing, cooking, laughing, playing, and praying. When there is distress or fear, these feelings can trap us in thoughts of an uncertain future, robbing us of our peace in the present. When

we suffer, we begin to experience time quite differently, feeling like time has not moved at all. ***Meditating on truth, goodness, and beauty might bring some peace to the present moment, because it is God's presence we are feeling.***

Where can you find truth? Jesus said he is "the way, the truth, and the life," (John 14:6). Where is there goodness in your life? Stay in the light and stay close to life giving people and habits. Give of your time and gifts if you are able and safe while doing so. Reach out to friends and family who might be lonely or isolated, pray for your pastors and bishops, pick up food and/or deliver food to those who are shut-in. Where can you find beauty in your life? Is it safe for you to go for a walk, sit outdoors, exercise and enjoy the sounds of nature? Listen to sacred music or if you are a musician and/or vocalist, sing songs of praise. And don't forget to laugh! Humour is a great stress reliever.

FIFTH ACTION

Orare: Latin for "to pray." St. Paul advises us to pray without ceasing, (1 Thess. 5:17). Continue to participate in virtual mass, spiritual communion and to pray your favourite prayers: the rosary, chaplets, examen prayer of St. Ignatius, and other prayers that feed your soul and mind. Consider starting a virtual novena with family and friends. Here's a great website for novenas: <https://www.praymorenovenas.com>.

Remember, worry cannot change anything, but prayer can. Dr. Larry Dossey has published the results of hundreds of peer-reviewed studies on the power of prayer. He, and others, concludes that the prayer that produces the most fruit is "Thy will be done." Our prayers are powerful, even more so when they are focused and intentional. Praying for God's will to be done frees us from attachment to outcomes.

When we were younger we might have prayed this way: "Dear God, I would really like this job. Or, Dear God, I would really like to date this person. Or, Dear God, I would really like to be promoted." As we mature in our prayer life, our prayer might become, "Dear God, if it is your will, I would really like to be promoted, etc." As we learn to trust God, our prayer becomes "God's will be done" without any attachment to outcomes, knowing and trusting that God's will is always for the best. "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." (Jeremiah 29:11)

When we pray we participate in the omnipresence of God. Our prayers can transcend space and time, helping those who are shut in or isolated. When we entrust our afflictions to God, He promises his grace, or gift of strengthening, will make sure the affliction does not dominate. ***His grace will help us manage each day, reminding us that not every day, week, month, or year will be like this one.***

We are the Church, God's people, those living and striving to do God's will, our friends in purgatory, and other holy men and women in heaven, with our Blessed Mother, praying for us. Prayer takes us beyond ourselves and connects us to other members of Christ's body, the Church. ***Let us pray that God's will be done*** for the following individuals and situations (add your own to the list as this list is not meant to be an exhaustive representation of all those in need of prayer during this time of crisis):

- All sick and suffering individuals
- Shut ins, seniors in long term care facilities, and patients in hospitals
- Medical staff and other public health officers
- Grocery store clerks and other essential workers
- Teachers and school support staff/administrators
- Families (All people, all states of life)
- Students completing exams or grades with online learning
- Bishops and clergy, parish support staff
- Unemployed staff and small and big business owners, ...
- Hospitality workers
- Lonely individuals
- Bereaved individuals

- People who are dying alone
- Engaged couples postponing weddings
- Politicians
- People who work in media/communications

SIXTH ACTION

Read widely: Take some time for spiritual reading and study. *God's Word continues to feed us and is available to us, making His truth accessible to all people.* Participate in bible studies and family and/or phone/virtual prayer and study. Women of the Word-Toronto and Dynamic Women of Faith have hosted virtual conferences and prayer sessions. There are apps that offer the Liturgy of the Hours and other treasured prayers and spiritual reading. Search saints of the day or read an autobiography or biography of your favourite saint. If you don't know where to start, reach out to a friend or your pastor for a recommendation. Formed.org and Wordonfire.org are some suggestions for online spiritual resources. Check out your diocesan website for other spiritual resources. Some of your favourite Catholic speakers have their talks available on their websites or on YouTube. Some conferences have gone to virtual presentations to deliver their content. Monsignor A. Robert Nusca has published a great book, *The Christ of the Apocalypse: Contemplating the Face of Jesus in the Book of Revelation*. Here's the link to his Amazon page: <https://www.amazon.ca/Christ-Apocalypse-Contemplating-Jesus-Revelation/dp/1945125756>. See also <https://www.facebook.com/msgrobertnusca>

The topic of his study is quite timely and relevant to today's current crisis. Moreover, we can show our support for so many of our wonderful Canadian Catholic authors: Dr. Moira McQueen, Dr. Patricia Murphy, Father Séamus Hogan, Deacon Peter Lovrick, Dr. Anne Jamieson, David Dayler, and Father James Mallon, to name a few. Please add to this list and encourage others to read widely.

SEVENTH ACTION

Yield to God's will, allowing Him the right of way. This means we are called to surrender to His great mercy and wisdom. In past writing, I have defined mercy as "God's perfect, unconditional, forgiving, generous, compassionate love, whether we feel worthy of it or not." Having intimate knowledge of God's mercy, St. Paul reminds us "nothing can separate us from the love of God," (Romans 8:38-39). Abandon your worries to Him and trust in His providence.

Throughout this time of physical isolation, I have had some very angry moments, feeling helpless, feeling not being able to fix anything. I have done my best to stay informed and to pray for all people in need, including those making decisions on our behalf, supporting the more vulnerable in our community with prayers and material resources. I kept asking God, "What else can I do?" The anger finally left me when I felt inspired to surrender all of the uncertainty, fear, anger, and anxiety to his divine providence, no doubt helped by the prayers of good friends and family—you know who you are! This act of surrender has helped me to focus on the gift of gratitude, reflecting on the many blessings in my life, including my husband, Robert, my children and grandchildren, my students, and so many cherished friends.

These steps reflect my journey so far, meditating on the challenges, both spiritual and emotional, presented by COVID-19. May God continue to guide and strengthen us as we pray for the balance to be restored in our families and communities, preparing us to enjoy the fullness of our faith life when we have the opportunity to gather and worship as one, no longer apart, but together.

"Do not be afraid!"

"...So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another,"
(Romans 12:5).