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Pastoral Letter from Archbishop John C. Wester
Our Call to Action - Facing the Serious Challenges of 2020

My dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In American football, one of the penalties I find interesting is that of "piling on." Of course, it qualifies for what also could be called a "late hit." But with all the tackling, pounding and smashing that goes on in football, it is somewhat amusing to hear the referee call a penalty for "piling on." I suppose, however, that if you are at the bottom of the pile, there is nothing amusing about it. These days I think many of us can identify with that poor fellow at the bottom of the pile as we go through one crisis after another in our Church, our state, our country, and our world.

Just as we were getting into the thick of things with the Chapter 11 Reorganizing, the coronavirus hit. Not only are we worried about our health but we now find so many without work, economic security or a home. Then, the simmering racism that has plagued our country for so long raised its ugly head as evidenced in the number of Black citizens who have been killed by some police officers. Added to the mix is the 2020 presidential election which has people on edge. All this plays out on a stage here in New Mexico on which we are already dealing with poverty, violent crime and addiction. And do not forget the fires and hurricanes. Piling on seems like an understatement!

I cannot speak for you, the reader, but despite the challenges we face, both communal and personal, I am at peace. Yes, I worry and fret, stress and strain, but overall, I am at peace. There are three reasons for this, which I would like to share here with the hope that they might help you navigate this difficult time.

We Catholics believe that God is intimately involved with us. God is not aloof. Yes, God is completely other, completely transcendent, but also immanent. God is closer to us than we are to ourselves and is always journeying with us along the way. This is a central theme of Jesus in the Gospel: "If God so clothes the grass of the field which grows today and is thrown into the oven tomorrow, will He not much more provide for you, O you of little faith?" (Matt. 6:30) We have traditionally called this help from God "grace." The Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us that grace is "...the gratuitous gift that God makes of His own life, infused by the Holy Spirit into our soul..." (CCC, 1999) In particular, God gives us *actual grace* to help us in a given situation, difficulty or challenge. Actual grace refers to God's direct intervention in our lives, that is, intervening with His true presence that gives us what we need to find new life in whatever situation we find ourselves. This is more than simply a psychological assist or the relief expressed by the axiom "misery loves company." Rather, God's intervention, God's grace, enables us to deal with the situation at hand and to grow through it into a new way of being. Instead of hiding our heads in the sand, God's grace prompts us to embrace our problems with the faith that with God at our side there is nothing we cannot accomplish. This is the first reason that I am at peace these days.

The second reason that I find peace now is that I am a member of Christ's body, the Church. Again, this is more than the bravado one feels by whistling when passing a cemetery at midnight. Through Baptism, I am one with my brothers and sisters in Christ and that intimate union with them is a source of grace in itself. Love is a powerful force in our lives and the love that binds you and me together in Christ gives me the strength to face the challenges of the day. Love gives me the strength to sacrifice my self for others and in that sacrifice, I find new life. As Jesus told us, if we want to gain our lives then we must first lose them! Reaching out to others during COVID-19, praying for them, sheltering in place, observing the protocols, procedures and policies put in place during the pandemic all contribute to the well-being of the community and to my own well-being. Knowing that I am loved and cared for is a force that stirs up my own resilience and gifts.

Which leads me to my final point. God has placed within each of us wonderful gifts and abilities that we often do not recognize or acknowledge. Some may remember the 1970 movie, "The Out of Towners." At one point, after Gwenn (Sandy Dennis) has been subjected to too many catastrophes to mention, her husband George (Jack Lemmon) tells her to keep running, "you're stronger than you think!" We have used that line in my family for years when one of us seemed to be giving up. As we wade through the catastrophes of the present moment, it is good to remember that we are stronger than we think. It is prudent to reflect on the spiritual, emotional and intellectual gifts and experiences that God has given us, all of which enable us to deal with whatever comes our way. I remember reading about a young man who was working on his car in the garage. The jack slipped and the car fell on him. He cried for help and his mother came running, only to pick up the car by the bumper just enough for him to crawl out from under it. His mother later told reporters that she had no idea where she got that strength. Love is a powerful force in our lives and so is God's grace. They both reside deep within each of us.

God's grace, the support of community and the gifts that we each possess combine to help us face the serious challenges of 2020. I know there are times when we all wish that someone would blow the whistle to stop the piling on. But ultimately, we are only penalizing ourselves if we allow our problems to overtake us and do not avail ourselves of what God has provided for us. You're stronger than you think!

Sincerely yours in the Lord,

Most Reverend John C. Wester
Archbishop of Santa Fe