

St. Mary's Seminary & University
Roland Park Neighborhood
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Baltimore, MD

Letters from the Park

To the Larger St. Mary's Community: *Letters from the Park* are weekly letters from Fr. Brown to St. Mary's seminarians who have been sent home during the Covid-19 emergency that he would like to share also with the larger St. Mary's community and friends and supporters of St. Mary's.

Letter #3

March 20, 2020

Monday of the Fifth Week of Lent

Force Majeure

Dear Seminarians,

Force majeure is a legal term used by parties to a contract to guard against events beyond their control. In Latin it's *vis major* "superior force", also in French *cas fortuit* and *casus fortuitus* in Latin "chance occurrence, unavoidable accident". Sometime such events are called an "act of God". The Coronavirus Pandemic is a *force majeure*, although I wouldn't call it an "act of God".

Human existence is in so many ways a mystery. Our lives are a mystery. Something inside of us wants to know the reason for everything; we want an explanation; we desire to know the purpose of our lives and the meaning of every event; we need to know why things happen, especially scary things that are beyond our control. We want someone to be in control who can change things, or at least who we can blame, or just so we can accept them when there doesn't seem to be an explanation that we can understand. There *is* an explanation for the coronavirus that we can understand; what we don't understand, and have a hard time accepting is the suffering it's causing, and the sense of vulnerability and insecurity it has created.

When things are explained as "the will of God" we have to ask "then why did God do this" or "why did God allow this to happen". *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* is a famous book by Harold Kushner, a Jewish rabbi, written after his child was diagnosed with a disease that would not allow him to

live beyond his teen years. It caused Kushner to start looking for an answer to one of life's most difficult questions: Why, God?

Many are asking that question now: Why God? A good priest friend, a pastor and teacher in northern Italy, and I have been corresponding. The other day he wrote "Every day people I know are dying; it's especially hard on religious houses. Aging sisters, brothers and priests live in close quarters where the virus has taken hold." My heart goes out to Luigi who's at the epicenter. It's not that bad here yet, although things are getting pretty tough in New York.

So why is this happening? Is God really in control? Is God punishing the world for this, that or the other thing? That seems much too simple to me: Just blame God for everything bad that happens. Because that's not the God I believe in. God sent his only Son into the world not to punish but to take the kind of punishment human beings so often inflict on one another; perhaps to correct the misbegotten notion that God is a God who punishes. Jesus came to console and heal, not to punish, not even those we might consider deserving of punishment. God "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good alike, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5:45), Jesus proclaims in the Gospel of Matthew. What that tells me is that in this life we are subject to a lot of random events, *force majeure*, *vires majores*, *cas fortuits*, *casus fortuiti*, which are not intentional "acts of God".

The need to attribute things to God that have nothing to do with God in my opinion is just another manifestation of our self-centeredness. I believe we should face the circumstances of our lives, whatever they may be, in such a way as to ask instead "What does my response to these circumstances say about me and my belief in God"? The current circumstances, like so many things in our lives, are the product of a random event caused by nature, completely explainable by science, not some intentional act of God. It's not the kind of thing God chooses to control. By the same token, it's not something we are in control of either, and that is perhaps what challenges us the most in our modern way of thinking that makes us believe we are or can be in control of everything. We aren't and we can't be, and that scares us. The pandemic is making us face up to that. We can do what can be done to try to protect ourselves, but we can't just make it go away: it's beyond our control. We can certainly look for effective treatments and a cure, and we'll probably find them eventually. But for now, it's out of our control. We can only take whatever measures we can to stay safe. And we will certainly do all we can to find treatments, a cure and an effective vaccine. But we will also have to accept results we wish wouldn't happen: many people will suffer; many people will lose their lives. Does that mean our efforts and our lives are futile? That's certainly one answer. But another is the answer that our Christian faith offers: That our lives have meaning and are well worth living in spite of the suffering people must often endure, in spite of the reality of death. On the one hand it is worth it because life is such a wonderful thing in and of itself, and just about everyone knows that. Everyone loves life when they're not suffering, everyone endures a great deal in the certain hope that when suffering passes life will be good again. But for a Christian it is also because we know life is not limited to the life we live here and now. We live in the sure and certain hope not only that life will be good when suffering passes, but that it will be not only good but even better, much better when we pass from our lives here and now to life that our faith tells us is forever, is eternal, with God and with one another in the Holy Spirit eternally. Relative security and affluence allow

us to avoid such questions. Times such as these make us ask them. Times such as these may cause some to despair. They can also cause us to rediscover answers that have allowed people to live in hope and experience profound peace even in the midst of suffering and death throughout history. These are times that require people to make important choices.

Was there ever a better time to pray Reinhold Niebuhr's Serenity Prayer written and shared with others during the difficult days of the 1930's in the United States:

*God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.*

F. (Shilly) J. Brown, Jr.