

A Letter from Fr. Gilbaugh to His Parishioners

Once, when I was in seminary, a very highly-admired classmate was dismissed. That decision by the priests who led our formation sent the student body into shock and confusion: why was he dismissed? What could possibly have justified that decision? If a man like him could be let go, then what next? Could we trust those over us, who held in their hands our vocations, futures, and spiritual welfare? Such were the questions in our minds and hearts, and believe me, the campus was abuzz as we shared among ourselves our anxiety. The situation became so threatening to our community welfare that the rector and his formation team chose to do something out-of-the-ordinary: they addressed us as a group, as our spiritual fathers, and one of them said something that I'll never forget – something that put my mind at ease.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “as you know, we are not at liberty to share with you everything that factored into our decision. That decision was a matter of our prudential judgment, involving matters both private and public, internal and external. It falls to us to make such decisions, and they are not always easy. Nor will we always be able to share with you the considerations that were before us, such that your curiosity would be satisfied. I hope that you would be sympathetic to our position, which we take very seriously. But since we are not able to answer your every inquiry, or divulge to you everything that we weighed in making our judgment, I hope that this question might help: knowing us, and our care for you and the Church, do you really think that we would ever do anything that would cause you distress, if we did not think it absolutely necessary? Do you really think that we would be so reckless, if we did not judge it for the best? I do not ask that you agree with our decision, but I do ask that you trust our good intentions, and that we acted in the best interests of the Church.”

There is a parallel situation occurring now, which I want, as your spiritual father and head of our parish family, to address with you. It concerns the mandates that Bishop Vetter, through me, has asked every parishioner to observe. Specifically – though not entirely – it concerns the mask mandate, which seems to be the straw that broke the camel's back for some people. Why has this particular issue drawn so much ire from certain parishioners? Because, in their minds, wearing a mask has become *symbolic* - symbolic of all that they object to in the coronavirus response, and thus outwardly symbolic of a person's affirmation or at least acquiescence to all the harmful effects that have resulted. To put a mask over their face seems, offensively, like being forced to wear a public stamp of approval before others of things that they deeply and sincerely reject. Considering the passion that understandably underlies this matter, therefore, I have asked myself: would it be better to let this issue lie, or speak about it? After having received numerous and frequent communications from extremely good people which conveys the passion they feel, I have decided to address it.

First, let me again affirm that this passion has arisen from a group of parishioners whom I consider to be extremely faithful and devoted. Yet, rhetoric on some of their parts has reached levels which I haven't experienced before: hyperbolic, accusatory, judgmental, and even personal. I have had parishioners tell me on one hand that I have been negligent in protecting the safety of others by not being strict enough, and on the other, that I have made them feel rejected and unwelcome by insisting on the bishop's directives. Still others have gone so far as to suggest that their church leaders are being complicit in grave sin, even the work of Satan. I hope you can appreciate that such sentiments – judgments, really - are not ordinary. While having been accused of many shortcomings, I have never before been accused of violating my vow of obedience, endangering the welfare of others, or being an agent of evil. This is new, this is intense, this is out of character for our community, and this is disturbing enough that I want to address the matter for the common good.

First of all, let me say that I am sympathetic to the diversity of opinions that my parishioners have, and have the right to hold. For example, and as I have said from the pulpit, I even have medical professionals in my parishes

who have expressed polar-opposite opinions. That is there right, and their purview. I have also had parishioners express divergent positions on a range of other matters: religious liberty concerns, governmental response concerns, practical concerns, liturgical concerns, and so forth. Point being: not everyone agrees on all matters when it comes to the coronavirus, or the Church's response to it.

But a fundamental principle should be appreciated by all Catholics, regardless of their take on things, namely: our bishop, our apostolic successor, possesses full and plenary right to make prudential judgments for his parish liturgies and for the properties in his stewardship, and more than right, sacred obligation before God to render those judgments for the good of those in his pastoral care. He will one day be judged by God for his fidelity in these matters, but he is not subject to our judgment. As one gentleman recently put it, "I might not agree with the mask decision, but I do at least believe in property rights."

The mandates that Bishop Vetter has required his people to observe in his churches, and which he has required his priests to enforce, are entirely within his purview. Yet, I assure you, he is painfully aware that no matter what he decides, he will upset certain people. So what might we all consider, given the fact that he can neither please everyone, nor share publicly every consideration which he has weighed in coming to his conclusions? This: that we owe him the benefit of the doubt that he has our best interests in mind, and would not be so reckless as to require anything of us if he did not judge it for the common good. Our bishop is not against us, he is not ignorant of religious liberty issues, he is not presuming to be an expert on virology, he does not want people to be without the sacraments. Let's remember, after all, that Bishop Vetter was the first bishop in the nation to re-open his churches after the spring lockdown. If you have judged him for ill, I ask you to humbly take a step back and consider that perhaps, you have crossed a line into the type of judgment which Jesus condemns.

As your priest and pastor who holds spiritual authority over you and has sacred duties to you, please appreciate that the position in which I find myself is not easy. I must be obedient to my bishop, and am happily vowed as such, and must also take into consideration many matters of prudential judgment at the parish level. Some of the matters which I must weight are private, some public. I am neither required nor able to share everything with everyone, nor should I be expected to. Moreover, parishioners are not privy to my personal opinions (which I do not allow to interfere with my execution of priestly duties), or my private conversations with the bishop (which I have had many of), or of the numerous serious considerations which go into keeping churches open within a hostile secular environment in the midst of a pandemic.

I am asking you to consider that the issues before us are complex, not simple. They are grey (prudential judgments), not black-and-white (moral absolutes). Just because you think one way does not mean that your fellow parishioner does, nor is obliged to. That is why I have emphasized, "Be obedient to your bishop." He levels the playing field for us all by making certain decisions, and that is what a good leader does. He is not asking you to agree with him, but neither is he asking you to do something objectively immoral. He is asking that, if you are in his churches, you abide by his prudential judgments, and that if you will not, that you respectfully refrain from public worship, the obligation to which he dispenses you.

I owe our bishop obedience as his priest, and am used to granting it. Perhaps, this is an opportunity for certain laity to learn what it means to submit their wills to apostolic authority for the first time – all the more difficult when they disagree with the bishop's conclusions (which is perfectly fine – Bishop Vetter is not requiring Catholics to agree with him, only be obedient to him). After all, to have Catholic faith means more than simply enjoying the Church's affirmation of what you like or believe anyway – it means placing your trust in the divinely-instituted authority that God has placed over you, even when that authority requires something that you

would not have proposed on your own. That is what an authentic and humble faith looks like – being willing to say, “I don’t understand it, I don’t even like it, but I accept it and submit my will to it.” After all, would we not be hypocritical to honor the Blessed Mother for submitting her entire life’s course to the archangel’s message, but then be strident ourselves? What does it say of us to know that Jesus submitted to having nails driven through his hands so that He could be in communion with us, if we would not put a mask on our face to be in communion with Him?

My friends, I want to appeal to you also on a personal level. I have given my life to the priesthood, and I serve you as such. I am your spiritual shepherd - not a hired man - and I love you. I have served my two parishes now for almost 13 years, and have tried to be faithful in my duties, even when that meant that I would displease people. For all my failings I can say, with a clear conscience, that I have always put the good of my parishes first in my decision making. Before you judge my intentions for ill, pause for a moment and ask yourself: do you really think that I would be so reckless as to cause you distress, if I did not think it for your good? If you want to disagree with my decisions, I don’t begrudge you that – but please don’t judge my heart, and please don’t be disrespectful of my authority. I think that after this many years as your priest, I deserve at least that much.

I know that my words will be challenging to some, and perhaps a bit difficult to relate to, since none of you are priests and pastors. So if I may, let me leave you with this relatable analogy: imagine a family dinner table, to which one of the children comes dressed in a way that the mother has forbidden. The father says, “You know that your mother disapproves of the way you’re dressed. Go and change your clothes, and come back.” To which the child replies, “I will not! Mom’s rules are stupid, opposed to my personal expression, and oppressive.” The father then says, “You are free to think that, but this is your mother’s table. You need to respect her rules and obey them if you want to be here. For if you don’t, you not only show contempt for her, but will tempt your siblings to disobedience by your example.”

Every parent can appreciate their right to make and enforce certain standards, and children’s duty to respect them. I highly doubt that any parishioner would think, “No, children should be able to do whatever they want, even in their parents’ home. If my children disregarded my rules, I’d certainly let them.” Would not such a response be absurd? Would any of us require such docility of our own children, yet fail to offer it ourselves? Well, Holy Mother Church sometimes requires things of us at the family altar that we might not like, and the father (yours truly) must insist that the children respect what their mother has required. The Church is a spiritual family, with spiritual authority, and even when we are adults, we have others whom God has placed over us, and to whom we owe obedience. I know that isn’t something that we’re often faced with, but it’s true, and it’s for our individual and common good.

My dear parishioners, let’s not allow ourselves to become divided, judgmental, and angry. Let’s not make a mountain out of a molehill, give in to self pity, become merciless to others, or remain stubbornly entrenched in our own perspectives. We are all stressed, we are all tired of Covid, we are all trying to do our best in the midst of difficult and sometimes complex circumstances. But please believe at least this much: your spiritual mother and father love you and have your best interests in mind. As you would expect from your own children, please trust that love, and be obedient to what they ask of you.

The Following is a List of Common Objections to the Bishop's Mask Mandate,
and Responses to the Contrary

Objection 1: If I decide that wearing a mask in church is not required of me (for whatever reason), then I may appeal to conscience and come to Mass without one.

Response: The current requirement that masks be worn in church is not a matter of moral absolutes, and cannot be made out to be one by any argument. It is a matter of prudential judgment, plain and simple, since it is a prudential response to the spreading of a highly contagious virus. Therefore, no Catholic may make an appeal to conscience which justifies direct and public defiance of mandates stemming from apostolic authority, to which all Catholics are obliged to respectful deference. If a Catholic would assert that the *Church* is in error by considering this a merely prudential matter, but that *they* are correct in judging it to be a matter of moral absolutes, then we would have to conclude that that person has a wrongly-formed conscience. It is noteworthy that an appeal to conscience in order to justify one's disregard of explicit apostolic teaching/discipline is precisely that which Martin Luther made in founding Protestantism. Catholics, tread lightly here – that is a very, *very* slippery slope. If a person disagrees with the bishop's decisions, that is hardly sufficient justification to set aside their high obligation to filial respect and obedience to apostolic authority. And if they aren't willing to submit their wills to judgments with which they disagree, but only those with which they agree – are they even submitting their wills to Church authority at all, or only enjoying the Church's affirmation when it comports with their own wills and judgments?

Objection 2: Because I have concluded that it is contrary to my human dignity, or even the common good, to wear a mask at Mass, therefore, I do not have to comply with the bishop's directive. Moreover, a bishop has no authority to mandate what I wear or how I present myself at Mass, and therefore, no authority to require that I wear a mask.

Response: It is quite a sweeping judgment to conclude that wearing a mask during a pandemic is a violation of principles so broad as human dignity, or the common good. Who exactly is the final judge, after all, of such things? Catholics should remember that the Church has always asserted her right to proscribe how they present themselves during worship. Notably, and for no less than nineteen centuries, Christian women were required to cover their heads - not at all times, but during worship. If the Church chose to re-institute that liturgical discipline, would anyone be justified in claiming that their human dignity was being violated? Of course not, and neither does being temporarily required to wear a mask violate human dignity. We should keep in mind that the Church does not require that Christians wear masks at all times and in all places, anymore than she ever required women to veil their heads at all times and in all places. This only concerns church property and public worship, no more, and it is perfectly within a bishop's authority to make decisions regarding the common good in those limited spheres. If people object to wearing a mask at Mass by the formal mandate of the bishop in the midst of a viral pandemic – then how can they support any standard of comportment within Mass? Does the Church not hold authority to mandate certain dress codes, postures, and so on, in her liturgies? Does a rejection of the mask mandate imply that immodest clothing, offensive t-shirts, and gum-chewing must now be allowed? If not, then who draws the line, if not the bishop himself?

Objection 3: Since the bishop is only extending the illegitimate mandates of government into his churches, I therefore do not have to comply, since it is within my rights to manifest civil disobedience in the face of governmental overreach.

Response: Underlying this argument is an assumption that no Christian has the ability, and therefore right, to make: namely, that they know what motivates the bishop, so as to dismiss his conclusions. It is entirely possible that the bishop is only being deferential to civil authority, but it is also possible that he agrees with it, or possible that he disagrees with it but judges outright rejection to be more harmful than good, or even that he has innumerable other unknown considerations motivating his decisions. Just because a bishop's proscriptions happen to align with those proposed by civil authority does not necessarily mean that the bishop believes that he is obliged to follow any particular governmental directives. We do not know what motivates the bishop's decision-making, and he owes us no explanation. A parallel situation to illustrate this point would be one in which the government proscribed measures and the bishop explicitly *disregarded* or even forbade them. If a Catholic argued that the bishop was in error by *not* following the government directives, the same line of reasoning would hold: that the bishop's authority to make decisions for his churches and people should be respected as within his rights. In other words, since his authority is of divine, not human, origin, it is therefore not subject to merely human civil authority. But when the two align, Catholics should not assume that the bishop is acting as a puppet of civil authority – that they cannot judge.

An analogy from ordinary life illustrates this point: imagine a boy whose father hears that another dad in the neighborhood has forbidden his kids to play in a particular park, and then the father gives his son that same rule. "You're only doing that because Mike's dad said he couldn't play in the park, and since I don't owe Mike's dad my obedience, I don't have to obey you in this case." Of course, that would be absurd. It doesn't matter what reasons the father has, or whether the ideas originated with a different person; he is fully within his rights to proscribe what he deems best for his son, and the son is in no position to judge his father's motives in order to justify disobedience.

Objection 4: Not wearing a mask at Mass is an individual matter with no harmful consequences to others, therefore, I shouldn't be required to consider this a communal issue. Moreover, it is absurd to think that a mask can filter out a microscopic virus and protect me from other people's disease, and so if I don't want to wear one, I shouldn't have to.

Response: Mask wearing, while sometimes misunderstood, is precisely a communal matter, not an individual one. Viruses are spread through airborne transmission of tiny water droplets called aerosols, including Covid-19. When one breathes, coughs or sneezes, aerosols are dispersed and can be inhaled by others. Masks restrict the spreading of potentially-infectious aerosols to others – they do not filter or strain other people's viruses for one's own benefit, any more than gravel can be filtered by a chain-link fence. They can only have a limited effect in keeping one's own aerosols from reaching others, since they closely cover one's own nose and mouth. Thus, masks are precisely for others, not oneself, and the very purpose of wearing them is to mitigate potential transmission of a harmful virus to other people in a communal environment, which the Mass is. Mask-wearing is intended for the benefit of others and the common good, not oneself and one's individual good.

Objection 5: The coronavirus pandemic is a harmful farce, rife with misinformation and abuse of power, and therefore, I should reject any suggestion of its affirmation, and even perhaps oppose its very existence. The very fact that there is not unanimous consent on the various aspects of Covid-19 demonstrates that requiring people to follow uniform protocols is unjustified.

Response: It is one thing to lament misinformation and abuse of power in response to Covid-19, but it is quite another to pretend that a viral pandemic with objectively harmful effects for certain groups of people, that has resulted in the president declaring a national emergency and every lower level of civil authority responding with decisive action, doesn't exist. Like it or not, the pandemic is a reality which cannot be ignored. To act as though

it doesn't exist is simply contrary to common sense. And just because there is not unanimous consent concerning its various aspects does not imply that uniform responses shouldn't be taken, since there is no issue debated among humans which ever finds unanimous consent. People are free to debate the issues, but authority figures are also obliged to make decisions.

Objection 6: I have a right to the divine worship and the sacraments, and thus, no hindrance may be placed before me by anyone in the obtaining of my rights thereof.

Response: Although it is true that a Christian has a general right to divine worship and the sacraments, this right is not absolute or without qualifications. For example, the providing of opportunities for Mass and the reception of the other sacraments depends upon many factors, not the least of which is the availability of ministers, resources, and places of worship, which are always limited. Moreover, one's participation in public worship is subject to one's conformity to the proscribed norms of said worship, as well as one's subjective worthiness to receive the sacraments. A few examples to illustrate the point would be that a man alone on an island could not claim that the church is denying his rights by not flying in a priest to minister to him; a person in the midst of a war could not claim that his rights are being denied because there is no Mass during the enemy's bombing campaign; a woman who is asked to leave Mass because she comes in wearing a bikini could not lament the trampling of her rights; a person who has publicly and unrepentantly committed scandalously grave sin may not claim denial of his rights if refused holy communion. Certainly, a governmentally-declared viral pandemic is an extraordinary circumstance that brings with it extraordinary measures, and thus, potentially extraordinary restrictions to otherwise normal sacramental availability.

Objection 7: If other people are disturbed by my not wearing a mask to church, that's their problem. It's not my responsibility to satisfy the wishes of others, be they the bishop, or my pastor, or fellow parishioners.

Response: Oh, really? Since when does individuality supersede charity, courtesy, docility, and consideration of others among Christians, and in church of all places? Even if one could justify a personal choice, that does not thereby imply that they owe nothing to others. Take the virtue of modesty, for example. A person might say, "If wearing this clothing would be a cause of temptation to others, that's their problem. It's not my fault that they struggle with lust. I have the right to wear whatever I want." Hopefully every Christian would reject such a selfish and strident perspective. Well, what if not wearing a mask makes another person feel uncomfortable at Mass – does charity not imply that you should consider their perspective, even if you find it flawed, so as to put them at ease? If not wearing a mask undermines your pastor's ability to hold everyone to the same standard, should you not be considerate of his delicate situation? If not wearing a mask at Mass might draw attention to yourself, would it not be better to avoid becoming a distraction from others' focus? If not wearing a mask might outwardly suggest rejection of your bishop's authority, would it not be better to avoid risking public scandal? If not wearing a mask would teach your children that it is okay to disregard church proscriptions that one disagrees with, would it not be better to avoid that harmful impression? The mask mandate is a uniquely serious matter because when a Catholic disobeys the bishop in this case, that defiance is manifested *publicly*, and within the sacred liturgy of all places. Many people, of course, disobey their bishops, but usually that is known only privately, and certainly not displayed for all to see at Mass. In other words, the publically-manifested choices of each of us affects others, whether we like it or not, and we need to weigh all considerations, not just our own preferences. Of course, if your only point of reference is the way you see it and what you want and what you like, but there is probably nothing that can be said that will appeal to you. But for some people, that's precisely the core issue: not everybody sees things the way you do, and some people have to balance a lot of differing

perspectives in order to do their jobs and keep a communal space open. Hopefully, being self-referential wouldn't be the perspective of a Christian.

Objection 8: Well, I still don't like the mask mandate, and can't understand why my priest is insisting that I observe it. I might not know my bishop, but I know my priest, and this feels like a real betrayal by him.

Response: If you're going to object to the bishop's directives, then what exactly is the alternative that you propose? It's easy to complain, after all, but hard to solve complex problems. Are you advocating that your priest directly disobey his bishop, to whom he made a sacred vow of obedience at his ordination? Are you suggesting that anarchy in church is a lesser evil than mask wearing? Are you suggesting that the bishop doesn't even have the right to decide what rules people follow on his own property? What course of action could possibly be taken against the bishop's public directives, which would not engender scandal, division, resentment, and disregard for the Church's authority?

Objection 9: Although my priest made a vow of obedience to our bishop, I haven't, and am therefore not obliged to obey the bishop.

Response: While it is true that a lay person is not obliged to the same level of obedience as an ordained person, that does not imply that the laity do not have a general obligation to filial obedience and respect as regards their pastors. This obligation is affirmed not only by common sense, but also by Sacred Scripture, canon law, and Church teaching as well. Let us consider that the mask mandate is extremely small in its sphere of influence: it applies only to church properties (not those of the lay faithful), and communal worship (not all communal gatherings of Christians).

In the end, however, we may say that the issue behind all of these considerations is really not about mask wearing per se, since that only happens to be the issue of the day, but will easily be supplanted by another issue tomorrow. At the core we find three simple principles: obedience, obedience, and obedience. And the fact of the matter is, there is a certain subset of Catholics today who are reacting against the mask mandate because it's possibly the first time in their adult lives that apostolic authority is requiring them to subject their wills to something they don't like – and this is a wonderful opportunity for them to learn what humble obedience and docility to that authority feels like. There could hardly be a more insignificant thing than wearing a mask in order to participate in the divine liturgy – and this is their test. If they can do this, they can do greater things later, but if they can't even do this, then larger and more important issues will only become insurmountable walls in the future.