

From the Chaplaincy



Photo taken from www.today.com

UNMASKING

By Fr. Francis Ongkingco

Our ongoing COVID lifestyle has forced us into being extra conscious of habits we used to take for granted, like washing and sanitizing our hands, refraining from touching our face, waiting in line patiently, respecting others' physical space and keeping social distance. But perhaps the most outstanding adaptation COVID imposed on us is the wearing of face masks and shields.

The face mask, in all its combinations of colors and shapes, has now become an indispensable daily apparel. Since the imposed quarantine in March 2020, we can't bring ourselves to leave the house or go anywhere without a mask and a shield - our weapons against this virus. Thus, the face mask and shield have become as essential to our daily survival as our cell phones and credit cards.

During pre-COVID, to enter a mall, a restaurant, or the grocery only required us to show our bags and greet the guard. But now, entrance to any establishment requires us to be of the right age, in good health, and with a protective mask.

When two people wear masks during any brief interaction, they bring down the possibility of viral transmission to 1.5%. However, when only one of them wears a mask, there is a 70% chance of getting COVID. Thus, when we all wear masks, we are more assured of not getting or passing on the virus. If we diligently persevere with this practice and other healthful points, we will make a very positive contribution in stemming the spread of the virus.

The great necessity of wearing a mask is truer now that establishments are reopening their doors to the public. Businesses cannot forever remain closed if they are to avoid bankruptcy and provide employment to many who need their jobs to earn their daily keep. Likewise, churches are opening as people, long-deprived of physically participating in the Eucharistic celebration or rite of reconciliation, desire to touch Jesus once again through these Sacraments.

The habit of wearing a mask however has one drawback: *defacing*.

We say that the eyes are the windows of the soul. I think in a manner we can likewise say that our facial expression is the “voice” of our heart. When we smile, we show that we are pleased or are happy. When we blush, we show our embarrassment. But when our mouth and cheeks are covered, a significant part of our face is erased. People only see half faces: the eyebrows, the eyes, the ridge of a nose. This half-face conveys a very static and impersonal message to us, more so when the eyes are shielded. A half-face masks and hides the real person behind the voice and makes authentic connection with others more difficult.

Wearing a mask can foment our hypocrisy towards our neighbors when we can readily hide our distaste towards a particular behavior or character. Behind a mask there is comfort in angrily baring one’s teeth, drawing indescribable contours of displeasure, and even silently whispering cursing words towards others because we are “hidden.”



Photo taken from www.thecraftpatchblog.com

Even though we may not give in to masking our hypocrisy, our physical and emotional connection with people is still strained because we are not able to fully read their facial language. Thus, it is no exaggeration to miss the smile that complements people’s eyes. Very often, we greet one another in streets and stalls, but we now feel some *disconnect* because we fail to show to others and others fail to see the real meaning of that greeting. We fail to capture their smile as they may have missed out on ours.

In a masked atmosphere, how are we going to help others read us properly? What do we need to do in order to unmask ourselves?

Speak with our eyes

First, we need to *Speak with our eyes*. This reminds me of the silent films of yesteryears where the actors had to convey their emotions through the eyes.

This entails eye-to-eye contact, and practicing expressions of wonder, awe, and appreciation that go together with some simple physical gestures like nodding one's head.

listen with our hearts

Second, we have to *listen with our hearts*. Precisely when a real communication barrier exists, one must strive to put more attention to what the other has to say. This entails liberating ourselves of distractions offered by smartphones and other gadgets and focusing instead on paying real attention to others. This becomes an exercise in *presenting* ourselves 100% to others and not in half measures.

positive body language

Third, we need to learn *positive body language*. To complement the covered muscular approvals of a smile, we must have our hands free from anything to convey that we are also totally there for that person and are readily accepting of what he may be sharing. On the contrary, our arms across our chest or akimbo, or our hands hidden under the table may immediately send the message of rejection, antagonism, or disinterest.

language of prayer

Fourth, we have to express the *language of prayer*. This can be easily communicated when we manifest our concern for others, when we compliment them for work well done, and when we comfort them in their trying moments. In all these, one must naturally express that he will be *keeping these things in prayer*. This language of spiritual accompaniment weaves through the other previously discussed points and will allow others to see *and feel the presence* of the soul *unmasked*.