

From our home to yours: Interview with Bishop Hying

As part of their ongoing efforts to provide content to help Catholics nurture their faith during the coronavirus pandemic-induced social distancing, OSV's Gretchen R. Crowe and Michael R. Heinlein welcome Bishop Donald J. Hying into their home (virtually) this week for a conversation about how the Church is facing the coronavirus crisis.

Gretchen R. Crowe: We are pleased this evening to be joined by Bishop Donald Hying of the Diocese of Madison, Wisconsin. Hello, Bishop!

Bishop Donald J. Hying: Hi Gretchen and Michael, great to be with you. Thanks for having me on. Always a joy.

Crowe: Thank you so much for being here. Bishop Hying has been a regular contributor to [SimplyCatholic.com](https://www.simplycatholic.com) for a couple of years now.

Michael Heinlein: Yes, about three or four years. He's recently, within the last year, last June, been installed up in Madison, Wisconsin, and previously was bishop of Gary (Indiana) for about five years in Northwest Indiana and was an auxiliary bishop in Milwaukee before that, as well as a priest for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, so he has a lot of pastoral experience and a lot of spiritual depth, so I'm very happy that we can bring him to you this evening.

Crowe: Absolutely. As some of you know, Michael and I have been joining the Simply Catholic community for night prayer for the past couple of weeks every night at 9:30 [p.m.]. We come on and just have an opportunity for community prayer and it's just been really a gift and it's just a joy for us to be able to bring you another great gift with a conversation with Bishop Hying.

With that, Bishop Hying, with the coronavirus pandemic, everybody's life has kind of been turned on its side, can you tell us how things are going in the Diocese of Madison?

Bishop Hying: Probably in many ways similar to your experience in Indiana. We're under a stay-at-home order, so two Sundays ago I suspended the obligation to attend Sunday Mass, but we still had Masses and I encouraged people who would be at risk to stay home. So that was followed quickly the following week by the order of the [the state] to not have gatherings of more than nine people, so this past Sunday was the first Sunday – we've had two Sundays now without public Masses – so the priests are celebrating Mass every day faithfully, as they would, but essentially without [a] congregation. So it's certainly impacted everything. The schools are closed, any nonessential businesses are closed. We still have people coming into the pastoral center to do work, many are working at home, so pretty similar to other experiences across the country.

Crowe: How has it affected your schedule personally? Have you added some different things to make up for some of the confirmations, etc., many things in your schedule that have been cancelled?

Bishop Hying: I love to stay busy, so there's like 500 things that have just dropped off the earth in terms of my calendar. We have 102 parishes and 44 schools here in the diocese, and my ardent goal is to visit every single one of them in my first year, and I was well on my way to do that until this happened, so visits got cancelled, confirmations got cancelled, meetings, fundraisers, talks, all sorts of things, so what that's been replaced with essentially are strategic meetings just to talk about the changing landscape that seems to change by the hour in response to this. So it's a lot of that. I called every priest of our diocese a couple of weeks ago just to check in with every single one of them. I hope to do that again this week. So I think that's important to stay

connected with them.

Crowe: Absolutely.

Bishop Hying: We're having a daily Rosary at 6:30 [p.m.] on our website, live, then I do a Mass at one of our parishes that's livestreamed every Sunday. So just calling people, trying to reach out to people, trying to stay connected with people. So the challenge is just how do we help people pastorally. We've kept our churches open for private prayer and also times of confession. We feel that it's extremely important that we can at least do that. I think that it's important that our people at least be able to go to confession, to be able to pray in church in front of the Blessed Sacrament.

Heinlein: I've noticed in some dioceses they are making the decision, probably based on local advice from health officials and government officials to close the churches and suspend the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Do you have any advice for people as to what they can do to process that reality? It's hard enough to kind of deal with the loss of the Eucharist, but I think people have been turning to Reconciliation as way to at least have some lifeline to the sacramental life, so to speak, so what can people do when they're unable to go to confession in different parts of the country?

Bishop Hying: I think the Church speaks of making an act of contrition, certainly, so if we're deprived of the ability to go to confession, we can internally confess our sins to God, ask for forgiveness, [and] make an act of contrition. Clearly that experience is not sacramental, it's not the same, but clearly also the Church allows for situations like this, where people just don't have access to the sacraments through no fault of their own, that they're not going to confession, that they physically cannot, so to make an act of contrition, to ask the Lord for forgiveness, with the firm resolve, number

one, not to sin, to avoid sin, but secondly to go to confession as soon as it becomes possible for them to do so.

Crowe: You know the Church as a universal institution. I think we're used to the phrase, "we're all in this together." We can go to any part of the world and we can participate in the same liturgy. We understand the Eucharist is universal, and now we're in this strange situation where we're all in this together except it's without the Eucharist, it's without the public celebration of Mass. What is it like from your perspective to be going through this?

Bishop Hying: It's very strange, I mean, it's strange for a lot of us. It's strange to celebrate Mass in a church with completely empty pews. So the way the laity feel, I know they feel the absence of being able to go to church, I also feel the absence of the laity when I celebrate Mass. It's not the same, the assembly is not gathered. That's an essential part of our Faith. And yet, we are gathered in the power of the Holy Spirit, if we think of how many families and individuals watch Mass online and kneel, stand and sit at the appropriate times, and participate as best they can in the power of the Eucharist.

I also am meeting people, some rather lukewarm Catholics, who this has really shaken them up in a good way. Where they've come to realize, I was taking church for granted, I was taking the Eucharist for granted, I always assumed that it would just always be there when I wanted it on my schedule. And now I've been deprived of the sacrament, the presence, of the Eucharistic Christ. And my hope is that absence makes the heart grow fonder, and that instills in them a greater desire for that which they cannot currently receive: mainly, the presence of the Lord Jesus, body, blood, soul and divinity. You know once we come out of this, I just pray there'll be this surge of Mass attendance that will last more than just two weeks, that we realize that crisis or not, pandemic or not, we're all hanging by a thread, we [recognize] our own

mortality, this life is fragile and limited, we need Jesus Christ, we need the Mass.

Crowe: Yes, absolutely. I think Pope Francis' *urbi et orbi* on Friday really addressed, what are our priorities, where do we need to have our focus now, and I think there's a lot of truth in that, what we're trying to do, and what a lot of people are trying to do, is find the opportunities right now, even amid what is a very serious time, and a great challenge.

Bishop Hying: Yes, think about the fact that people are not working, people are not at school, there are no sports, there's no frenetic running around that we all do, it's come dramatically to a halt. And that may be very challenging for many marriages and families. On the other hand, it may be exactly the blessing that people need, to learn how to be together, eat together, pray together, and just stay at home once in a while. I think there's some far-reaching implications to this. There's silver linings in the cloud.

Crowe: What is some advice you'd give to families during this time, so it becomes a time of opportunity that they're taking advantage of?

Bishop Hying: I think to look at, how can they pray together as a family, if they haven't been doing so already. And again, there's so many great online opportunities. But maybe just read a story from the Bible, pray the Rosary together, participate in Mass, as often as they can. Also, I think, I don't know, I live alone, I'm celibate, what do I know about such things? But also to give each other some space to be able to nurture their own relationship with God. I think we all need silence and space in our life, a little bit of solitude. It's got to be hard if you've got five or six kids and are just cooped up in the house all the time. It's also more time to practice heroic virtue. St. Francis de Sales said that an ounce of virtue practiced in a moment of challenge is better than a pound of virtue practiced when everything is fine. So,

just perseverance, charity, patience, forbearance, all those gifts to really just bear with each other, love each other, and not drive each other crazy. [Laughter] That's got to be really hard for some families.

Crowe: All these little things we should be doing anyway.

Heinlein: I've been thinking that our home is kind of like a little domestic monastery these days, perhaps always relevant would be the rule of Benedict, but especially these days, maybe.

Bishop Hying: I think of my childhood, I mean, in the '60s people weren't gone all the time. You came home for dinner, dinner was at 5 o'clock every night, and life was geared around the family, and I think perhaps for younger generations this is a whole new reality. I think for me it really takes me back to my childhood, this was kind of how life was, and it wasn't all that bad.

Crowe: We've heard people say that too. We've got some friends who said they were sitting outside on their porch and watching the neighborhood come alive, socially distant, of course, but talking to each other, neighbors talking to each other, from next door.

Heinlein: Which they've never done in the last decade. [Laughter]

Bishop Hying: So I think there'll be good coming out of this, I really do.

Crowe: Seems like it. What about for those individuals who are alone? I think that they in a particular way should be in our prayers right now.

Bishop Hying: Yes, that's right. A lot of our priests are calling all of their parishioners. But starting with the elderly, the shut-ins, those who live alone, just to remind

them that they're not alone, to see if their needs are being taken care of, are they getting groceries, are they getting medications, that sort of thing. This reminds us that there are people in our society that live like this all the time, because of illness, or poverty, perhaps abandoned or just alone in the world. So it sort of puts us in solidarity with those who kind of live the social distancing every day of their life.

Heinlein: I've been thinking too of how it's opening us up to the reality of Christ's own solitude, as he faced his passion, as we're moving into Holy Week, and so on, and there's a real void in our lives, obviously, with the suspension of public worship, and the lack of community. So I've been thinking about that as we move into Holy Week, but I'm also thinking about the other side of the coin, trying to keep the perspective that we're an Easter people, and that Christ is with us as he promised. He's not abandoned us, he's still with us. So I'm wondering if you have any thoughts, any suggestions, or ideas, on how we can keep that balance, that perspective, and also some more practical suggestions as we move into Holy Week. How can we make the sacred realities of Holy Week alive in our homes?

Bishop Hying: I think of some very practical, specific ways. Read the Passion out loud on Palm Sunday. Maybe even process around the yard if you have children. Make your own little Palm Sunday procession. Why not? Holy Thursday: Read the Scriptures for Holy Thursday, the washing of the feet from the Gospel of St. John. Perhaps even wash each others' feet in your own ritual, just to remind yourselves that we're called to be servants, to really pour ourselves out for each other. I think, Good Friday, to meditate on a crucifix, again to read the Passion, perhaps observe noon to three as a time of silence and quiet in the house. Easter Sunday, I think, again to proclaim the Gospel, to have a festive meal, to pray the Rosary each of those days.

There's many ways we can bring Holy Week into our home, even though we can't go to church for Holy Week. But centering around the Scriptures and our traditions, our sacramentals, all of that, I think, make it very real, especially for our children, perhaps in a way that will shape them differently than if we hadn't had this experience. But I think the balance, I like your reflections on solitude, because when I was doing seminary formation, I always said to the seminarians, we often think that anybody who's married is never lonely, and those who aren't married are always lonely, and we know neither of those statement is true.

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But I think loneliness is endemic to the human condition ... but when we stop fearing it and running away from it, loneliness becomes solitude, and it's in solitude that we hear the voice of God. It's in solitude that we pray, and we honor that sacred solitude of Jesus, the agony in the garden. It was in that solitude he made the most radical, fundamental choice of his life, and that was to embrace the cross. So I always think, our salvation was essentially won in the agony of the garden, because that's where Jesus united his will to the will of the Father and accepted the cross. It was done in this radical moment of solitude. So it's in that solitude that God is most present. I went with the mystic thing, people like St. John of the Cross, I love reading John of the Cross, even though I never understand it. [Laughter] If you think you understand John of the Cross, you don't. The mystics would say, God's light is so bright it appears to our senses as darkness, and God's presence to us is so profound it appears to us as absence. So it's that whole paradox that what seems to be empty and dead is actually this abundance of light, and that's the Paschal Mystery.

Crowe: Those are certainly most reassuring words for times like this.

Heinlein: Yes. It's certainly what we need to hear and what we need to chew on, meditate on, and, hopefully, give us hope in the midst of this darkness.

Bishop Hying: Our faith has been preparing us for this our whole life, so if we just immediately fall apart in the face of something like this, it's really a challenge for us to go deeper in our faith. We need to be so rooted that something like this is not gonna ultimately defeat us. Yes, are we afraid, we are anxious, are we overwhelmed, yes. But, in the end, our faith is really about getting through things like this and knowing that God invites us to trust him in a radical way. Simon Peter was doing fine walking on water, until he took his eyes off of Christ. So it's safer to be on the open water with Christ, than to be in the boat without Christ, and it's so counter-intuitive. It's a radical moment when Jesus is inviting us to go deeper than we ever have, in terms of confidence, faith, trust, surrender, and that's hard, but it's [something] to save us.

Heinlein: The real challenge for some of us, a lot of us, is that faith is prompting us to go beyond what we even know, what's been the anchors of our faith, like the Eucharist, we don't have that physical presence even, but we know that the Lord is risen and that he could walk through walls and he could appear to his friends on the day that he rose from the tomb. So we know he can be there with us and that's where I think we are really having to dig deep these days.

Bishop Hying: That's right. I think of the Babylonian captivity, when Israel was conquered, the nation was destroyed, the temple was razed to the ground, the people were taken as slaves to a foreign land, [unclear], that lost everything except their faith in God. And that's a radical purification and we're nowhere near that extended [unclear]. It does remind us of those moments when God tells us [unclear] providence involved [unclear] something that really shakes us and invites us to go deeper in our faith.

Heinlein: When you talk about a purification and kind of losing everything, I don't know where these days will lead, we know our economy is on some rocky ground, right? How do you think that all these realities are going to weigh in on the institutional life of the Church? You as a bishop are probably dealing with this very closely these days, that there's a pinch in our schools and our parishes and it could be more than a pinch if weeks and months go by where we don't have public gatherings and an increase in [unclear], so how do you kind of see this unfolding? What are you seeing right now particularly, and how can the Church still be the Church in the wake of this crisis?

Bishop Hying: Those are great questions. I think it's still very new. Our priests are certainly struggling with the fact that collections have dropped off dramatically and yet expenses really have not and so, we want to pay our teachers, we want to pay our employees, we want to help them put food on their tables for their children, we want to be faithful to that. So just today I had a webinar with all priests of the diocese and a large part of what we discussed was communication and stewardship. So I'm convinced our people will be as sacrificially and generous as ever, probably even more so, as they realize the depths of the church's need. Coupled with that is the realization that many people will simply not be able to give the way they used to because of their own economic straits, and we fully understand that. So an interesting thing too, what happens to some of our institutions? ... I did four years of mission work in the Dominican Republic, and we didn't have a lot of money or physical resources or buildings, and yet the Church was beautifully herself there. Sometimes I wonder are we gonna lose some of our buildings, some of our money, some of our institutions, and is it inviting us to relive the mystery of the Church in a different way? Perhaps it isn't relying on those material things. It's the people, it's the living stones of the Church.

Heinlein: Yes, we have to look at it perhaps as a pruning that will give new life.

Crowe: I think we've seen that just in our family life, too, in the choices that we're making, we're wasting less food, we're trying to be good stewards of what we have, we're trying to be prudent with the time we're spending with certain things, I mean, I think this type of event just calls us to those kinds of reflect and take action in some ways that maybe we wouldn't have if we weren't pushed to it.

Bishop Hying: Yeah, that's right. My parents grew up in the Depression, so at my house nothing ever went to waste. I mean, you wore clothes until they were rags and then you used them as rags. Nothing was ever thrown away, that's how they lived. I said, if the economy depended on you, it would collapse. [Laughter]. And yet so generous to the church and to the poor. It's amazing what you don't need when you don't have it.

Crowe: That's so true and I think it's a good side of this, is that it really gets our priorities straight and it gets us to figure out where our focus and attention and our gifts should be put.

Heinlein: Our priorities, what really matters.

Bishop Hying: That's right. People ask me how I am in all this. I feel a remarkable peace. Perhaps even more peaceful than when things were normal and good, because I just think the Lord is bringing us to a very sacred place in this, if we have the faith to hang on, and the eyes to see. I really think he's doing something extraordinary, with us, for us, through us, in this. I feel a great peace in all of it. I mean, it's easy to say because I've got money in my pocket and food and shelter, and I just pray for those who don't.

Crowe: Well, we know that in time of crisis, while challenging, can bring out the best in people and I think we've certainly seen some very inspiring stories covered by

the Catholic media, certainly. What have you seen that has inspired you in these last couple of weeks?

Bishop Hying: Just yesterday we asked our younger priests to volunteer to go visit people who have tested positive for the coronavirus. And we wanted to orchestrate this at the diocesan level so that our older priests would not be put at risk. So if there's a request for an anointing, or a confession for somebody with the coronavirus, we would have this pool of younger priests who'd be willing to go even if it's not their parish. And within just a couple of hours we had nine priests immediately volunteer to do this. So the heroism and the perseverance of our priests is something that truly inspires me.

And a pastor told me just yesterday that a parishioner gave him \$10,000 because he realized that the church was probably financially struggling, so he gave \$10,000 just out of the blue. Also instances of people knocking on doors of neighbors who are elderly or alone and doing what they can to help, even with restrictions that are in place. So things like this are bringing a lot of good out of people. Americans are good at coming together in a crisis.

Heinlein: I really appreciate you being with us and taking the time to share your thoughts and considerations on the present moment.

Bishop Hying: It's always a joy to talk with both of you and thank you for all you do for the faith. It's a blessing and I'll just continue to pray for you and your family.

Heinlein: Thank you. We certainly pray for you and your work, and are very much inspired by your ministry and happy to share you with our audience as well.

Crowe: I think you said a lot of very powerful things that will help people through this time of anxiety. I do think that emotions swing from side to side, it's hard to know where we

are. It's hard to know – the news changes from minute to minute. We're all taking this in as we go on, and so to hear some of what you had to say I think will bring a lot of peace to people.

Heinlein: Absolutely.

Bishop Hying: It's the not knowing, we want to control everything, and this is a moment when we're just out of control.

Crowe: But that's another opportunity for great grace.

Heinlein: Amen.

Bishop Hying: That's right

Heinlein: Could you give us your blessing before we go?

Bishop Hying: Absolutely. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

All: Amen.

Bishop Hying: Lord God, we ask that you pour forth your blessing upon us, upon our listeners, upon our nation, upon our Church, we ask that you drive from us this virus, heal those who are ill, receive the dead unto yourself. And help us all to grow in our faith, hope and charity, and in our trust in you, and in our reliance on your grace and your providence. We ask this blessing, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Heinlein, Crowe: Thank you so much. Have a good evening.

Bishop Hying: Thank you, good night, bless you.