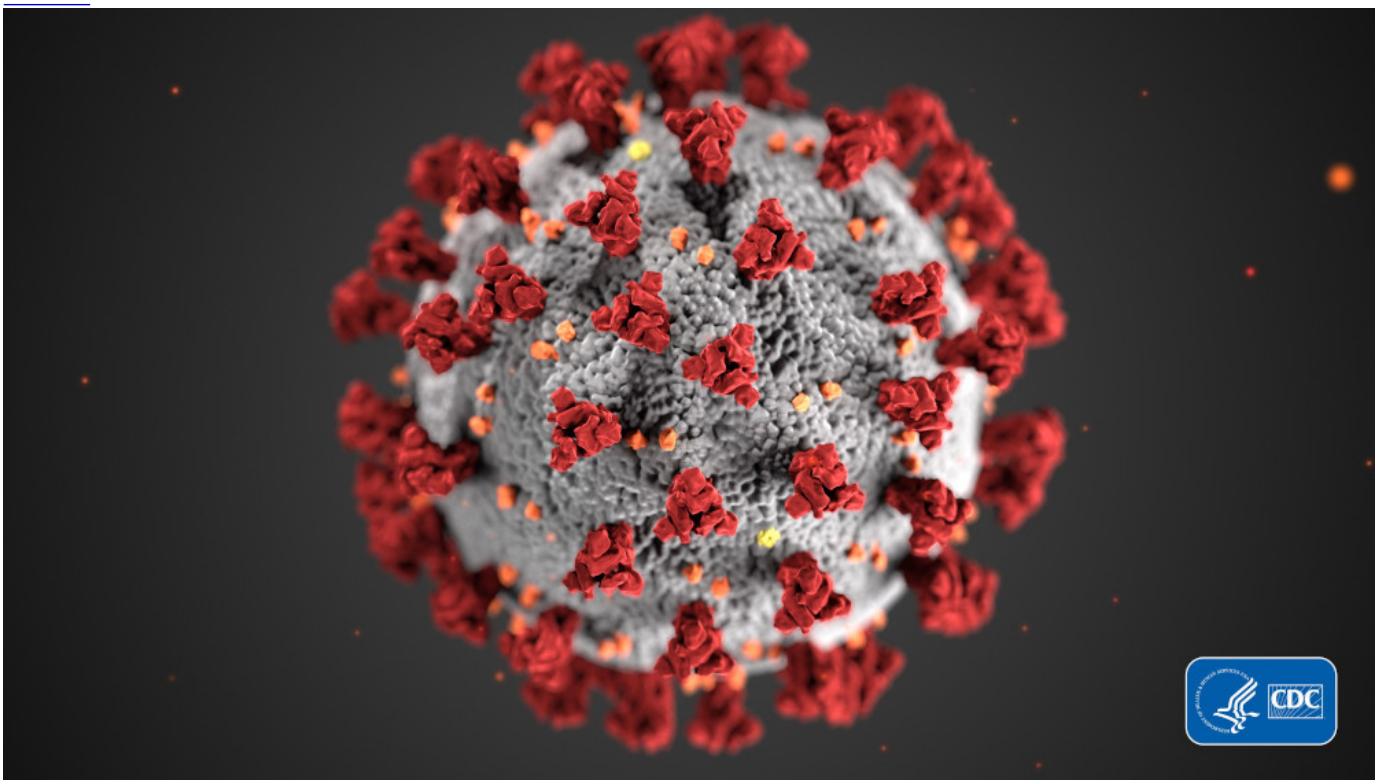
Opinion

News



This illustration provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in January 2020 shows the 2019 Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV). Image courtesy of CDC

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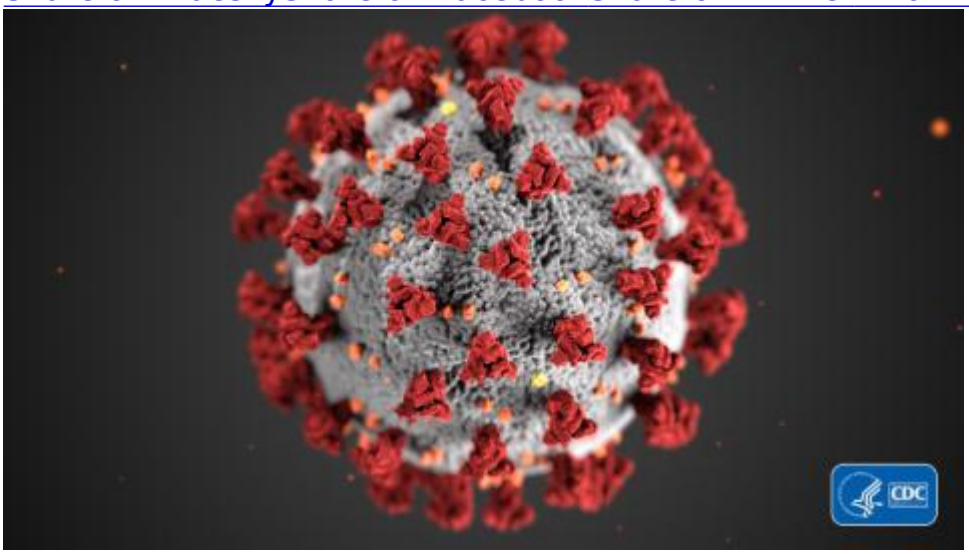

This illustration provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in January 2020 shows the 2019 Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV). Image courtesy of CDC

The call from a member of my community came at 11:30 March 15 evening. “The test came back positive. I have the virus.”

Luckily, at 54 years old, the Rev. Steve Planning is one of the younger and healthier members of my Jesuit community, and so far, the symptoms are only mild. It began with a low-grade fever March 13 afternoon. He woke up March 14 still feeling feverish and after the flu and other causes were ruled out, a coronavirus test was given on March 14 night.

Earlier on March 15, before I knew about this, Religion News Service published my column “Spirituality in a time of quarantine.” Now I must practice what I preach, something neither columnists nor priests are very good at. My entire community is in self-imposed quarantine so that we don’t infect anyone else. So far, I have no symptoms.

Our Jesuit community of men shares meals and common spaces, much like a family. Most of us are over 65, so we need to do everything we can to avoid infection. When one of us gets sick, it is likely the rest will too. We are now practicing “social distancing” and I will continue my recently developed service of disinfecting with Clorox the surfaces that are frequently touched (doorknobs, elevator buttons, handrails, tables, clothes washer, dryer, etc.).

Learning about an infection at 11:30 in the evening is about the worse time possible. I don’t blame my sick brother for calling me. He did all the right things if you suspect you have the virus. He also knew I was a night owl, and we had to be ready to inform everyone else when they woke up. But after the call, sleep was not easy as my mind kept racing.

The first thing that struck me when I got the phone call was that I could not do what was human and Christian — rush to his bedside to give him comfort. He had already self-isolated himself and one member of the community is designated to respond to his needs. This is the proper protocol. All I can do at present is pray.

I then asked myself, with whom have I been in contact in the last week whom I need to inform? One person had come in for spiritual direction and I had spoken to a group of about 20 people. No handshakes were exchanged and the talk was in a large church so we may be lucky.

Next, I wondered whether I was infected. A week earlier, Steve and I had traveled together to an event in a car, about a half-hour ride each way. We also share an addiction to Triscuits, which we consumed by reaching into the same box. Our community has just discontinued our habit of putting out common bowls of peanuts and other nuts.

If I get infected, I am blaming Triscuits!

Then I asked myself, what if I get sick? I realized that I need to update my power of attorney for health care, which designates who should make decisions for me if I am

unable. Our community has a new superior and the old superior is still listed on my form. Do you have a power of attorney for health care? Does your doctor have a copy?

Then, since I take care of the finances of a relative who is in assisted living, I need to give my brother all the necessary information so that he could take over if I became incapacitated or died.

Alas, none of these thoughts sound very spiritual, but today the practical is spiritual. Hopefully, I will have something more spiritual to say in my next column. Stay tuned.

[Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese is a columnist for Religion News Service and author of Inside the Vatican: The Politics and Organization of the Catholic Church.]

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