For economic reasons people have been wary of the mandates to safeguard our health during the Coronavirus. There is an economic impact when businesses like restaurants are limited to the number served. If we were to paint a picture of the villain, some would first focus on these mandates taking aim at masks or signs calling for people to keep at a distance or the political officials in charge of these mandates. Funny thing is the true villain is the virus, and it has caused death, over 500,000 Americans more than all our war dead in Vietnam by a factor of nine times. There is anger at the measures we have taken to try to keep people from dying from Covid, but there seems little anger against the virus.

Moses had the people cast their eyes upon the serpent lifted high on the pole. God said that their wounds from the serpent would be healed. The serpent got the blame, but it was the grumbling of the people that got God upset. In anger, God released the bite of the serpents as punishment. There was enough food, but the people simply disliked what was served by God. When the serpent was lifted up, the people were compelled to look upon the reason for their death. Yes, the immediate cause was the venom of the poisonous snake. The underlying cause was the people’s sin.

Today, during the Lenten season of reflection, we are called again to meditate on the serpent lifted on the poll. As Christians, we focus on how Jesus remembered this story and used it to explain his own death on the cross. Jesus describes the mission of the Son of Man, his favorite title for himself, as a mission to save the world, to bring eternal life. In God’s eyes, Jesus says, those who walk in the light will have their good deeds seen while those who live in the darkness reject him.

Who are those folks who have walked in the light in the midst of the Coronavirus? I think of the medical workers in hospital ICU or nursing care facilities and in recent weeks the volunteers distributing the Vaccine. Called essential workers employees at grocery stores have labored in the midst of the public keeping foodstuffs available for our sake. Of course, our heroes in the police and fire and EMS have kept on serving the public. Teachers too deserve so much credit for their ability to adapt and try to keep instruction alive.

All of these good people and others have been visible, and their light has illuminated their good works. We celebrate these rays of sunshine, but the past year has seen a darkness not caused by COVID-19. The scourge of violence has occupied our local news media and attention of the general public. At this time, I feel a duty to incorporate mention of “**Breonna Taylor,** a 26-year-old African American woman, who was fatally shot in her Louisville, Kentucky, apartment on March 13, 2020, when white plainclothes officers Jonathan Mattingly, Brett Hankison, and Myles Cosgrove of the Louisville Metro Police Department (LMPD) forced entry into the apartment as part of an investigation into drug dealing operations.”

That is the dry statement of facts on which parties agree. The shooting, however, quickly led to disagreement on the significance of the event. For some Taylor’s death aroused suspicion and led to protests in our city. In the eyes of the nation’s media, Louisville has become identified by this killing as much as Minneapolis has become defined by the killing of George Floyd. You could say, like Moses, I wish to lift up our serpent of violence which brings death and division. When that violence is caused by injustice, that is treating people unjustly according to their skin color, then we call this sin. Not all violence is sinful nor is treating people differently according to their race always unjust. The Church in rare cases accepts the use of violence in warfare, and medical practitioners do treat patients differently according to the incidence of certain illnesses according to race.

I am referring to violence that is unnecessary and has its root in injustice. This is a matter of sin. The lynching of African Americans in times past is as clear an example as I can find of the sin of racism. Whereas something like lynching has disappeared, the death of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd among others has aroused suspicion that race played an unjust factor in their death. I do not know this for certain although both the city of Louisville and Minneapolis have made multimillion dollar awards to the families of the deceased.

Our Chief Shepherd the Archbishop of Louisville played a leading role among our nation’s bishops for years. He quickly responded to the Breonna Taylor killing by calling for the church leaders to listen to the people closest to this crisis, our African American Catholic community. I would remind us that African Americans have worshipped in Louisville from the period before the civil war like Saint Augustine Church on Broadway till now.

Archbishop invited the leading voice on Catholic Social Teaching and Racism, or the sin of treating people unjustly according to race, to Louisville this past week. Like Moses who reluctantly accepted the mantle of leadership of God’s people, Bishop Shelton Fabre, of Louisiana oversaw the Bishop’s Committee writing our latest teaching document on the sin of treating people unjustly according to race. It was published in 2018 and reviews more than fifty years of Catholic Teaching on race from the civil rights period forward.

I identified parish and school leaders from St. Luke and St. Rita to attend this presentation and to hold a private discussion. All of us were engaged fully in listening to Bishop Fabre and then discussing our experiences of watching our communities wrestle with questions of race. I do not care today to enter into depth. We can say that for our communities race brings to mind what is our identity and to what degree do we wish to welcome people to our community. It is all too easy to be critical and focus on what is left undone. Positively, many folks have welcomed people of different races and languages to our neighborhoods from Blue Lick to Okolona. Some have joined our parishes for worship, and some have chosen our parish school for their children’s education. You could say that we have tried to be tolerant or accepting of the wish of others to share our neighborhood, parish, or school. Bishop Fabre, however, asked if the next step involves going beyond tolerance of the desire of others to join us. Are we convinced yet that it is God’s will that we live together, worship together and attend school together? Tolerance is letting the other guy have his share. Conversion of heart goes beyond being tolerant of others; it means saying our very lives will be improved if we welcome others.

The world used to permit lynching; today it increasingly demands tolerance. The values of the world change. Today, tolerance is a buzzword for the world. The values of the kingdom, however, remain the same. If a time existed as Roman Catholics that we guarded access to the parish or school to keep out others, that is sinful- always has been and will always be. We deserve no pat on the back if we are just now jumping on the tolerance bandwagon. The worldly do not set the standards for the children of God. Our standard has always been and will always be different.

If we are to live in the world but not be of the world, we as Roman Catholics have to undergo a conversion of heart. God’s people from the time of Moses understood this, and so did the prophets including Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As the People of God living in God’s kingdom not our own world, we must go beyond the imagination of the worldly. To say that including others brings us closer to the kingdom of God would be a huge leap of faith. That is the standard which Jesus embraced and showed time and time again by his eating with strangers. It may go against our tribal loyalty, our sense of parish identity, our comfort to welcome those we call strangers.

I dare to say that to be Christian means going beyond tolerance. The kingdom of God is more than a group of tolerant people trying to please others, being what some call politically correct. Our standard is to please God. Obeying the commandments demands much more than being correct in worldly terms.

It is considering all things from God’s sight and not our own. Only people willing to be critical of themselves can see the need to make a change. As Catholics we call this sorrow for sin, confession of sin and a willingness to avoid the occasion of sin. Worldly people will not feel sorrow, not confess sin nor try to avoid it. Jesus tells us that they are lost. God forbid this would apply to one of us.

Bishop Fabre opened our eyes wider to imagine God’s kingdom as God looks upon race. God sees our differences and rejoices in them for he is our maker. God sent his only begotten son to die for all, making our differences in skin tone, race and language seem so minor and or common fault of original sin so much greater. God was not tolerant when he sent his only begotten son to die for us sinners. God wanted us his creatures to enter into his kingdom. If God wanted us to the extent of sacrificing his own son, how much more must we do to welcome others?