

Mass myopia and coronavirus

Massimo Faggioli explains how COVID-19 is unmasking the clericalist Church

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St. Peter's Square closed for pilgrims and tourists, no Wednesday general audience. Pope Francis held the audience on TV inside his private library. (Credit Image: Evandro Inetti/ZUMA Wire/MaxPPP)

"Instead of watching Mass on the computer, why don't we read from the Bible together?"

That's how our eight-year old daughter reacted last Sunday when we gathered to watch the celebration of Mass at home, where we've been self-quarantined since last week.

From the mouths of babes...

Our daughter is used to seeing me as an extraordinary minister of the Eucharist at our parish where she's preparing to make her first communion. That ceremony, by the way, will most likely be postponed.

She really misses not being able to attend Mass right now. Our parish priest usually has lay ministers lead a special biblical catechesis for the children during the Liturgy of the Word, which she, her little brother and their classmates attend.

Just like us, she is going through a difficult moment. But, even at her young age, she's grasped the theological point.

Lockdown, social distancing and being Church

The situation of protracted total lockdown and social distancing is pushing all of us – and in a rather unexpected and abrupt fashion – to explore new ways of being Church.

No one should romanticize what is happening. Given the lockdown, not only the celebration of Mass, but also the Church's pastoral activity has almost totally stopped. This is a serious problem.

One Italian bishop from the Lombardy region (ground zero of the pandemic in Italy) told me that they are very worried.

"This is like a crash course in Church and the media for us," he said. "We can use the media as a substitute for our on-the-ground pastoral activity, but only up to a certain point."

Many bishops are expressing this same anxiety on social media. But some are advocating for "business as usual."

They don't seem to fully understand how dangerous it is – not just for priests, but for the entire community – to push the limits of the sacrosanct social distancing that now is required of us.

A state of emergency that challenges our theology

The coronavirus emergency is forcing all of us to re-conceptualize our religion. Not just intellectually, but also visually, emotionally and anthropologically in all of us.

This is a formidable test for our theology: liturgy and sacramental life, ecclesiology, and the relations between Church and State.

It is particularly challenging to our moral theology.

Epidemics and pandemic tend to awake brutal survival instincts in all of us. They can also provoke other reactions and behavior that contradict the message of the Gospel.

If the Church is to be a presence in all of this, it must be so in ways that are different from its normal default position – the celebration of Mass.

The current pandemic is testing the capability of the institutional Church – including the papacy and the Vatican – to be present, almost invisibly, without being able to rely on the apparatus of the visible Church.

Pope Francis' pastoral response to anti-coronavirus measures

It's also a difficult test for Pope Francis' theology. The pontificate has to walk an extraordinarily fine line between the need to follow the government's anti-virus measures for the sake of the people and the need for the Church to be the Church.

Historians talk about the "institutional loneliness" of the papacy. That's true in normal time. But a pope is even lonelier in times of crisis. Francis is being forced to interpret his job as a lonely actor on the now almost totally empty stage of Rome, in an almost Becket-like performance.

The 83-year-old Jesuit pope looks more comfortable navigating the public and political side of the issue (the relations with the state) with his appearances, than in dealing theologically with the meaning of this emergency for an all-ministerial church.

Judging from what he has said up to know in his homilies at daily Mass and his reflections at the Sunday Angelus, his emphasis has been more about what the priests can and must do, rather than on what every Christian called to holiness is able to do.

His reference last Sunday to Don Abbondio, the cowardly priest in Alessandro Manzoni's *The Betrothed*, the famous novel staged in plague-stricken 17th-century Milan, was a nice literary touch. But it reflected a rather priest-centered Church.

Like fish out of water

There is so much of Christian spirituality that can be rediscovered at this extraordinary time, without going back to a theology of the priesthood that is no longer sound and even less safe in time of a pandemic.

I was listening on Saturday, via internet, to the sound of the bells warming the air of Rome's totally empty streets. It was like the beginning of Grand Silence for a community where all differences are now relativized.

It reminded me of a monastery and the saying of one Abba Antony, one of the Desert Fathers: "Just as fish die if they stay too long out of water, so the monks who loiter outside their cells."

Many of us are going to have to live inside for quite some time, and it's not clear for how long.

Catholics need the sacraments, but our body is already the temple of the Holy Spirit. In Christian life there is a sacramentality that does not depend on the sacraments per se.

Liturgy of the Hours and 'lectio divina'

Watching Mass online is really no substitute for physically participating in the celebration of the Eucharist. And during this time of pandemic we should be focusing less on live-streamed Masses, "spiritual communion" and private devotions.

The hierarchy (Pope Francis included) should be encouraging Catholics to explore the Liturgy of the Hours, "lectio divina" and family celebrations of the Word.

There is enormous potential in this. It's not just a matter, in some countries especially, of offering a viable alternative to the hyper-clerical fare that some Catholic media like EWTN dishes up. It's also about providing real spiritual nourishment in ways that are theologically richer and technologically just as simple.

Catholics in many countries will find themselves in this lockdown situation for the next several weeks, if not months. In this time of emergency our Church – that includes all of us, not just the hierarchy – is showing how difficult it is to truly actualize the vision of spiritual renewal that was launched by the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and has been so energetically re-proposed in this pontificate.

For instance, the post-Vatican II liturgical reform was not just the "new Mass" – the turning around of the altar, use the vernacular and active participation of the faithful. It was also a way of understanding liturgy in the context of a non-hierarchical ecclesiology and of a theology of Revelation that ushered in a new approach to Sacred Scripture.

This is a moment to experience solidarity with others, especially with the most fragile, as we fulfill our Christian and civic duties.

Apart from some intellectuals and clerics, most Catholics do not seem particularly troubled by this extraordinary and temporary emergency measure of suspending communal liturgical celebrations. But the pope and the bishops must tell those who are that that they should not be.

Public liturgies halted, our liturgical spirit continues

Catholics will continue to believe. We will continue to keep our faith community united through social network, offering support to each other as we anticipate the day we can resume our normal liturgical life.

In many countries the Church has already suspended Mass and other liturgies with the participation of the people. This will happen in other countries, too.

But our liturgical spirit has not been halted. There is something liturgical in the spontaneous, but coordinated singing from Italian balconies (as bad as that singing may be at times!).

We support each other in a thousand ways, in the one human family, in our common humanity and in faith. Certainly this difficult period of dealing with COVID-19, however long it shall last, will have consequences for faith and the Church.

But this is a time to trust the *sensus fidei* of the people and find ways that are both creative, but also very traditional (the liturgy of the hours, lectio divina, family celebrations of the Word) to sustain us as we cross this desert.

Otherwise, all the recent talk about the urgent need to end clericalism will be revealed to have been just another mask – one we certainly don't need at this time.

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