

Pope Francis, an unusual Urbi et Orbi and liturgy in the time of pandemic

When the public, liturgical activity of the Church is reduced to a minimum, we must carefully discern the discreet signs of the Spirit in our daily lives, says Massimo Faggioli

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Pope Francis presided over a moment of prayer in front of the deserted square in St. Peter's Square in the Vatican on 27 March. (Photo: AFP)

The coronavirus pandemic is pushing all of us to relativize and prioritize. This is also true for the Catholic Church, or at least it should.

The forced cessation of the Church's public activities – in some countries, it will last well beyond Easter – brings up the importance of the theological concept of "Christianity as style".

[Christoph Theobald](#), a French-German Jesuit, has been developing this idea over the last few years. He published his latest thoughts on it in a long essay that appeared in the Italian Catholic monthly // *Regno*, well before the coronavirus emergency.

'The saints next door'

Christianity as style during the current pandemic, means rediscovering an elementary, basic faith that does not depend on external constructs. This is a key to understanding the importance of Pope Francis' pontificate at this tragic moment for the world and the Church.

The Jesuit pope's emphasis on discernment as an engine of interior mobility is even richer now when external mobility is not possible. Theobald mentions his exhortation on holiness, [Gaudete et Exsultate](#), which evokes the image of "the saints next door".

"Very often it is a holiness found in our next-door neighbors, those who, living in our midst, reflect God's presence," Francis writes in that 2018 text.

This could be a true catechesis for millions of people now be stuck at home for a number of weeks, forced to coexist with their neighbors like never before. Christianity is an event of encounter with the divine, but also with others.

A time to ponder the 'last things'

This time of forced social distancing will likely help us rediscover the theological value of encountering Christ through our encounters with others. It is a reversal of French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre's famous dictum: "Hell is other people".

Eschatology, or the "doctrine of the last things", has always been very powerful in giving the right dimension to oversized ideas and institutions.

And this kind of emergency exerts an enormous pressure on all of us to ponder the last things. It also reveals the stuff certain churchmen and ecclesiastical institutions are made of.

Two styles of Church

"Style is the man" – the proverbial saying that one's chosen style reflects one's essential characteristics – can also be applied to Church leadership. The coronavirus emergency is showing us that there are two ways of expressing the style of the Church.

On the one hand, there's the approach of the [Pontifical Academies of Sciences and of Social Sciences](#). In a statement on March 20 they offered "lessons for future actions and changing priorities" in the wake of the virus' spread.

"We note with great appreciation the tremendous services currently provided by health workers and medical professionals, including virologists and others," the academies say in the opening lines of their statement.

Not of the sacristy, but of humanity

In a similar way, the Holy See's daily paper, [L'Osservatore Romano](#), offered a similar approach espoused by Francis by publishing two articles in its March 29 issue on liturgy and the "domestic church".

One of the articles suggested the possibilities of this moment.

"The domestic memorial contains a peculiar secular dimension. It does not smell of sacristy. On the contrary, it touches the foundations of our humanity," it said.

But there has been also another style on display, and particularly because of the liturgical emergency we all are experiencing.

Looking backwards, issuing prohibitions

Uncomfortable as I am with the idea of Easter Masses celebrated without the people, I am not sure it would be a good idea to postpone Easter. But I am sure there that the Roman Curia should have a better way to convey this to the Catholic faithful.

It was unseemly that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) should choose to [publish decrees](#) on the extraordinary form of the Roman Rite on March 25, in the middle of the pandemic.

But, at the same time, it indicated the contradiction between Francis and the liturgical agenda of the pre-existing Vatican establishment.

Then there was the style of the [Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments](#) (CDWDS), which was strictly in terms of prohibitions and limits.

It reminded me of when China's State Administration for Religious Affairs decreed in 2007 that all the reincarnations of tulkus of Tibetan Buddhism must get government approval; otherwise they are "illegal or invalid". Involuntary humor, but truly Kafkaesque.

The pope alone

This is important in order to understand Pope Francis' incredibly moving prayer on March 27 in an empty St. Peter's Square. There was the pope, alone; but also in the company of the faith and his people.

The style of that intense *Urbi et Orbi* was also – indirectly, but not so subtle – an indictment of other styles of leadership, included within the Church and the Vatican.

There was not only a mastery of the aesthetics of this spiritual moment, but there was also a significantly different theological reading of the pandemic.

The pope shunned any moralistic interpretations of the disease, a recurring temptation in our civilization, as Susan Sontag wrote in her 1978 book, [Illness as Metaphor](#).

In the style of Francis there was the whole message, and it is the style of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65): the "noble simplicity" that is stressed in the [Vatican II constitution](#) on the liturgy.

The medium is the message

The Jesuit historian [John O'Malley](#) wrote in his 2008 book *What Happened at Vatican II* that the council's "style of discourse was the medium that conveyed the message", and that "the style is thus values-expressive".

And as Theobald pointed out, the blind spots of the theology of Vatican II (celebrated almost sixty years ago) can be filled with the insights coming from the style of Vatican II.

Francis' embrace of the whole world would be unthinkable without the council's theology of the Church in the modern world, where the institutional loneliness of the pope within the Church and the distinctiveness of Catholic ecclesiology are understood in a fundamental solidarity with the one human family.

A Church of paradoxes

Catholicism is full of paradoxes. The pope alone in St. Peter's Square, praying in front of a basilica that was built, in part, with the dirty money of indulgences; and yet here he is offering an indulgence to the people through his *Urbi et Orbi* blessing.

As I wrote to my students, it's the same Church of the sex abuse crisis that we are studying in our course. Francis is evidently aware of the contradictions and paradoxes, as we have seen in the last seven years.

It is particularly evident in his way of not letting the Roman Curia define his ministry. And we shall see what sort of impact the pandemic and the recession will have on his plans to reform the Curia.

The contrast between Francis and the ecclesiastical status quo is not just a paradox. It is also a real and problematic contradiction.

For one thing, it strongly contradicts the ongoing pandemic-induced revanche of liturgical traditionalism, with phenomena of clerical solipsism sometimes accompanied by the re-emergence of semi-magical rituals for local media consumption.

Solidarity, not triumphalism or exclusivism

It is true that it is easier for the pope than for the bishops and priests who have to keep their local churches afloat, both spiritually and financially. Francis has at its disposal the formidable apparatus and scenery of the Vatican to convey the message of communion in the Church and with the world.

But his style is also a message to the institutional Church to overcome the temptation of using this moment as an opportunity to go back to a theology and a liturgy shaped by triumphalism and exclusivism, instead of solidarity.

Understanding the importance of style as a Church also means, in this particular moment, the capability of sustaining ourselves spiritually without the usual institutional supports.

At the very least, we should not be burdened with additional mortifications.

This can be a disaster or it can be an opportunity for the Church to rethink its pastoral and missionary activity. The Gospel is an ecclesial presence – in the sense of being relational – and this moment can help rebuild the credibility of the Church.

When the public, liturgical activity of the Church is reduced to a minimum (or to nothing), we must carefully discern and detect the discreet signs of the Spirit in our daily lives in lockdown.

It's more a matter of dos than of don'ts.

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