

Community Mass vs. Private Prayer and Private Eucharist?

Parish liturgist reflects on post-COVID return to communal worship

[Justin Stanwix](#)
[Australia](#)

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Worship is getting serious. From the outset I will admit to a bias: streamed [Mass](#) is not my thing.

No complaint about the presiders although they can be wooden and are often scared to appear human. Even afraid to say something welcoming or acknowledge that the new "retreatants" are uneasy, or over COVID lockdown.

That's not a jibe about clericalism or sponsored by ingratitude. For me the electronic medium encourages a stiff presentation. Much worse it allows viewers to return to or remain in a pre-Vatican II context. But it is just not Mass – the ultimate participative experience that includes reception of Holy Communion.

There is no comparison with recorded music versus attending a symphony orchestra. No participation in a communion experience is demanded or intrinsic to the event for either of those joys.

So, do we stay in the comfort of the living room with streamed Masses on the television or commence the return. Will we return to "attending Mass" for private devotions and to "receive the Sacrament".

In other words no real communion with the congregation at any point – not on arriving as community, not joining in the "source and summit of the Church's life", not praying in communion at the Table of the Word, mere observers of the presentation of the gifts, not really present for the sacrifice of the Lamb of God who is truly present, approaching the altar with serious personal devotion but with no real sense of community engagement and departing as soon as possible with substantial detachment preserved.

A Church that failed and a people that developed bad habits

Arguably, this is not their fault and certainly not a personal criticism. But it is an expression of failure. In formative years they arrived to flickering candles, distant from their pews, focused reverently on an equally distant tabernacle, watched the priest preside -- mostly with his back to them and speaking in an ancient language.

Private devotion was the only real alternative, apart from the nourishment of a good homily. The rosary was popular with many. Often as a member of a large family they were able to slip away in the company of family, knowing few and engaging with fewer.

Over centuries we failed them and they developed bad habits.

By ancient designs ideal for monasteries, inappropriate architecture, heavy altar rails, rude screen and choir, slowness to respond to the Liturgical Movement of the 20th century. Even the theology explained in the Constitution on the Liturgy about the rights and role of the People of God managed only sporadic implementation.

More than 50 years later Pope Francis valiantly attempts to encourage attention to *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, promulgates a major pastoral exhortation in *Evangelii Gaudium*, encourages the praying of the scripture including a dedicated Sunday of the Word, regularly appeals to youth and is constantly encouraging a synodal Church.

We all know we are slow to embrace change. In fact we prefer no change. And we know how long it took to implement previous Council decisions and the decades of effort for reform of the liturgy in the lead up to Vatican II.

Not surprising that Mass attendance continues to fall unabated. We now have the opportunity to bind and grow new communities built on the rock that can be formed by the People of God worshipping and living the message of Jesus in deep communion.

If ever there was a time...

As church doors begin to open can we expect a commitment from the People of God to return with a new consciousness of their baptismal rights? Will they be prepared to demand the entitlements of "Priest Prophet and King" attached to their baptismal certificate?

Is full conscious and active participation to be both asserted and required? Are we prepared to honor the sanctity of private devotion and deep personal prayer, but positively differentiate their practice from the time when we assemble as the People of God?

That is when we join in public worship of our God in the unique gift that Jesus left us before the Lamb was slain on the Cross at Calvary. That is when we share as one, from the one loaf.

If ever there was a time when the celebration of Eucharist should be restored as the source and summit of the Church's life it is for us now, in post-COVID deprivation. That will require embracing the joy of the Gospels and the enlightenment of communities who know there is no Easter without Christmas.

Admittedly, full participation with a temporary ban on singing is challenging. But we have organs, pianos and other instruments. That does not require any "performance" to work.

We can allow our musicians to be creative and establish the right joyous atmosphere that is appropriate for the People of God to worship in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass with its fullest meaning.

Presentation of gifts may have to remain on hold but the congregation could demonstrate that it is "my sacrifice and yours" by raising a hand during the offering of the bread and wine.

The kiss of peace can take a new form by raising one hand or gesturing with joined hands to convey the unity and communion we share.

A deliberate move can be made to engage the congregation with each other as Mass concludes. "Go in Peace to love and serve the Lord " AND our neighbours -- can have a new meaning.

After all, we are the People of God – in communion!

Justin Stanwix is chair of the liturgy team at St Mary Star of the Sea Parish in the Diocese of Wollongong (Australia).

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