

Vatican urges balanced approach to anti-COVID restrictions

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Holy See not so concerned about church closures for health reasons as government interference in how worship services are organized

As Catholics in some parts of the world have challenged government restrictions on congregational worship aimed at stopping the spread of COVID-19, the Vatican has carefully stayed out of the debate.



Sunday Mass at the Saint Louis Cathedral in Versailles on November 29. (Photo by THOMAS PADILLA/MAXPPP)

But the Holy See has kept an eye on places such as [France](#) where the bishops have challenged measures to tightly limit the number of people who can gather for public liturgy. And on several occasions, senior Catholic Church officials have tried to give some pointers to shed light on this complex debate, which mixes freedom of worship with health safety precautions.

Since the first wave of the pandemic last spring, Pope Francis has repeatedly stressed the need to respect health standards and has urged priests and bishops to find "pastorally creative" solutions.

In the just-released book he did with the British writer Austen Ivereigh -- *Let Us Dream*, Simon & Schuster --, the pope praised those governments that, "with some exception, ... have made great efforts to put the well-being of their people first".

"Some priests and laypeople have lost the sense of solidarity and fraternity"

On the other hand, he takes to task "certain groups" that have "protested" against these measures.

And he's not shy about pointing the finger at the Catholics among them.

"Some priests and laypeople have given a bad example, losing the sense of solidarity and fraternity with the rest of their brothers and sisters," Francis states.

"They turned into a cultural battle what was in truth an effort to ensure the protection of life," he argues.

In this vein, several Holy See officials have insisted on the importance of showing the pastoral creativity the pope is calling for.

One of those officials is Maltese Cardinal Mario Grech, the General Secretary of the Synod of Bishops, who just got his red hat at the November 28 consistory.

Grech is known to be close to Francis. And in a long interview published in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, a Jesuit magazine whose proofs are vetted by the Vatican Secretariat of State, he spoke of "the richness and variety of experiences that help us contemplate the face of Christ". The cardinal took a rather grim view of the "pastoral initiatives in this period (...) centered solely around the figure of the presbyter".

In this context, characterized by the inability of some to find any means other than through the Mass for reaching Christ, Grech even spoke of "spiritual illiteracy".

He affirmed that the Eucharist clearly is "the source and summit of Christian life". But he praised all those initiatives that have helped foster the "rehabilitation of the domestic Church", as well as those carried out within families themselves.

Concerns about religious freedom

In reality, what worries Rome is not so much the closure of churches for health reasons, but rather government interference in how worship services are organized.

The Vatican believes this is a dangerous precedent that some regimes could use to limit freedom of worship.

Thus, Archbishop Paul Gallagher, the Vatican's equivalent of "foreign minister", made it clear on November 16 that access to the sacrament remains "an essential service".

It was this political concern -- in the broadest sense of the term -- as well as direct contacts with certain French bishops, that prompted Cardinal Robert Sarah to speak out.

The Guinean cardinal, who is prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship, tweeted on November 26: "The faithful have the right and the duty to firmly defend, without compromise, their freedom of worship."

"It is a secularized mentality that considers religious acts as being secondary activities in the service of people's well-being, similar to leisure," he continued.

These are the same words Cardinal Sarah used in a letter he sent to bishops around the world last August, called "[Let us return to the Eucharist with joy](#)".

In that text, he insisted that Catholics have "the right to receive the Body of Christ and to adore the Lord present in the Eucharist in the manner intended".

But the 75-year-old cardinal did not relativize the gravity of the coronavirus pandemic. On the contrary. He said Catholic had a duty to comply with "hygiene standards issued by public authorities or bishops".

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