

Reflections on Covid-19 from St. Patrick's College Maynooth

Post-lockdown, can the Church return to 'business as usual'? by Dr Aoife McGrath

As we move tentatively through the phases of Ireland's *Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business*, church doors are reopening for in-person, socially distanced liturgies. While for many this is a long-anticipated moment, we should ask ourselves are we truly ready? Our focus may well be to get back to 'business as usual,' but to what 'business' are we returning?

The 'newsworthy' impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the life of the church has been centred on the sacraments. This year Easter was celebrated remotely, and the sacraments of Holy Communion and Confirmation were postponed until late summer/autumn. Baptisms and Weddings were likewise delayed. The most radical and tangible transformation has been to Funeral ceremonies and the daily or weekly celebration of the Eucharist.

In the era of lockdown, priests (sometimes with a few lay ministers) continued to serve their communities by celebrating Masses remotely, for the intentions of the faithful, either from empty churches or their own homes. The Mass came into our homes via radios, televisions, smartphones and computers. We watched, waited and prayed, in anticipation of being re-admitted to communal worship.

For some, these past months have been a fruitful time for creative and revitalised personal prayer practices. However for the majority, the absence of communal prayer and receiving the sacrament of Communion has been sorely felt.

As a lay theologian, I found the feast of Corpus Christi, on 14 June, particularly challenging. I sat alone in my house facing a screen, watching, as a priest celebrated Mass alone from his home. As he read from Deuteronomy, I wondered whether this pandemic was our 'vast and dreadful wilderness,' meant to humble us, not just for God to know our inner most hearts, but for us to know ourselves.

The feast usually speaks to me of our relationship with Christ and with all his baptised followers; of a food that nourishes us, his disciples, co-heirs of – and co-responsible for – Christ's mission throughout the world. This meaning is made tangible in our companionship, through our physical presence together, in our mutual sharing in the Eucharistic meal, and our collective sending forth.

This year, however, I felt only absence: the isolation of one individual facing another who could neither see me nor know that I was present with him. Our dissonance was compounded by his inadvertently leaving insufficient time for me to respond to the prayers; my silent watching while he ate and drank.

As I recited the Spiritual Communion prayer, I reacted strongly to its words: this absence was not just about me and my heart, nor only about me being united wholly with Christ. I remembered the words of Pope Benedict XVI, 'I cannot possess Christ just for myself; I can

belong to him only in union with all those who have become, or who will become, his own. Communion draws me out of myself towards him, and thus also towards unity with all Christians.' (*Deus Caritas est* §14).

In this vision, love of God and love of neighbour cannot be separated. Being present together for the Eucharistic meal helps to nourish our relationships with each other, so that we can truly be united with God. But our living communion faces new challenges because of the coronavirus.

This evolving world we live in has opened up what some have called a 'twin consciousness,' at once a feeling of connectedness, mutuality, solidarity, and cooperation in the face of common adversity, and simultaneously an awakening of divisions and gross inequalities, competition for essential supplies, and survival of the fittest in failing economies.

Where is the church as a sign, instrument, and advocate of communion in such a world?

When Pope John Paul II spoke of a 'spirituality of communion' he meant the ability to think of others in faith as 'those who are part of me'; the ability to share the joys and sufferings of others, to offer them 'deep and genuine friendship,' and 'make room' for them in our lives. The great challenge of this millennium, he said, was 'to make the Church the home and the school of communion' (*Novo Millennio Ineunte* §43). His words have taken on new meaning in 2020.

For the majority of Catholics, phase three reopening will be the first opportunity to participate in Mass and receive Eucharist since lockdown began. I wonder, following our experience of 'church' and Mass over these past four months, what meaning will the sacraments hold for us now? Will laypeople fall into the habit of watching/observing, while the priest is active/doing?

Will we fear spreading the virus so much, and be so used to our isolation, that our companionship is weakened? Will the Eucharist be nourishment for our individual spirituality, rather than nourishment of the Body of the Church for its wider mission?

Will we choose to live *a spirituality of communion*, not just when we are gathered for Eucharist, but every day? How do we take responsibility for our share in this business? Can we give communion a home, and share our learning with others?

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