

# The Mass has ended... but the clerical abuse continues

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3 avril  
2020

## The coronavirus-induced quarantine should force the Church to do some serious soul-searching about the Eucharist

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The whole world is now infected. The coronavirus continues to circle the globe, bringing the usual rhythms of life and commerce to an almost total standstill.

The pandemic caught most countries and their people completely off-guard and unprepared. And many are already saying that this global crisis will force all of us to radically re-think many things about the way we live, organize our society, conduct our business, relate to one another...

They say things will never be the same as before. We will have to change.

That includes our Churches, too. Our faith communities were caught blind-sided just as much as any others.

And most religious leaders – especially our Catholic priests and bishops – have been flat-footed in the way they have responded to what soon became the liturgical lockdown.

## **The idea of "virtual participation" needs to be seriously re-thought**

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They really have had no idea what to do, except to continue celebrating Mass all by themselves and then broadcast it on television, or live-stream it on the internet, for the rest of the Church to merely watch.

Because that's what this is – something to watch. And while that's not necessarily all bad, it certainly is not participating in any essential way in the celebration of the Eucharist.

Despite many decades of the televised or radiobroadcast Mass for Shut-ins, the last several weeks of cancelled public liturgies should make it abundantly clear that this type of "virtual participation" needs to be re-thought.

You can't have a virtual Mass any more than you can have a virtual Thanksgiving Dinner. The latter would be extremely weird and even absurd, just as the former is proving to be for many Catholics during these days of liturgical lockdown.

Think about it. What if mom and dad were home alone, but wanted to prepare the huge Thanksgiving feast and share it, over TV or live-streaming, with the rest of the family?

## **From absurd to cruel**

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To make the analogy work, let's say that the kids and relatives who are joining this virtual feast have no possibility of preparing their own meal. They can only watch as mom and dad perform the holiday ritual. And then they watch their parents eat, while they have nothing.

And to further strengthen the analogy, the parents would strongly urge – if not demand – their children to play along with this charade.

This would not only be absurd. It would be cruel.

True and loving parents would not put their children through such a thing. But even if they dared, only those children who have grown up being abused would put up with such depravity.

Good parents do not deprive their children. If their kids can't eat, neither will they.

## **Only those who eat can be nourished**

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Obviously, the analogy is not exact because we are not talking about any normal meal when we are talking about the Eucharist. It is a sacrificial meal; a meal/sacrifice commemorated around an altar/table.

The meal aspect of the Eucharistic celebration cannot be separated from its sacrificial aspect. But it must not be minimalized to the point of almost being completely eliminated, as it is for more than 99% of the Church's members during these virtual Masses.

Only those who eat can be nourished. This is how the Church has always understood the words of Jesus, "Take this all of you and eat of it."

Even when frequent communion was not practiced, the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) established what came to be known as the "Easter duty", obliging Catholics to confess their sins to a priest at least once a year and receive the Eucharist during the Easter Season.

This liturgical season continues until May 31<sup>st</sup> this year. And, hopefully, by then Catholics in most places will have been able to begin worshipping together again.

But in the meantime, is virtual Mass really necessary or helpful?

## **Eucharist theology that's inadequate and schizophrenic**

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The liturgical lockdown has shown us that the Church is more fully cleric-centered than most of us would like to admit. It has also revealed inadequacies and even a type of schizophrenia in our theology about the Eucharist.

It is caught somewhere between a post-Tridentine legalistic/mechanical view of the sacraments and a post-Vatican II understanding/recovery of baptism as the prime sacrament that makes one a member of, not just the Church, but also a member of the common priesthood.

Those who are ordained to Holy Orders are more properly called presbyters. They have been ordained to organize and lead the community's worship. But the priestly character is shared by the entire community of the baptized and is present in the worshipping assembly.

Our theologians and pastors must discern more attentively and reflect more deeply on this reality. This will certainly lead to wider, though perhaps more subtle ramifications for how we understand and celebrate the Eucharist.

## "Extraneous props at a clerical drama"

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It was astonishing to read a [document](#) that the bishops from the Italian region of Umbria published on March 31 to justify priests celebrating Mass alone without the presence of anyone else.

"The assembly participates in the celebration but is not a constitutive part of the sacramental action, as is the ordained minister, presbyter or bishop," the bishops wrote.

"This is clearly not what the People of God need to hear – that they are extraneous props at a clerical drama," commented a friend, who happens to be a presbyter.

It's not clear who wrote the bishops' document, but the author states some even more disturbing things that underline the Church's theological (and ecclesiological) schizophrenia surrounding the Eucharist.

No matter, the men who lead the 13 dioceses located in Umbria are ultimately responsible for the content.

## A cardinal and two former top Vatican officials

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And it is alarming that one of them is the president of the Italian Episcopal Conference (Cardinal Gualtiero Bassetti), while another is a former secretary of the Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments (Archbishop Domenico Sorrentino).

The person who actually signed and published the text is the regional conference's president, Archbishop Renato Boccardo.

He's a career papal diplomat and longtime Vatican official who rose to become the second-in-command of Vatican City State. He also worked in the papal liturgical ceremonies office for a number of years.

Boccardo wrote to the priests of his own diocese ten days earlier, expressing similar sentiments found in the regional document.

"I urge you not to neglect the daily offering '*pro populo*' of the sacrifice of Christ," he wrote.

No need for people. The priest is offering the sacrifice on their behalf. And he's partaking of the meal all by himself, as well...

## **"Maybe that will come later"**

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Catholics will have to decide on their own how they will pray and participate in the sacred mysteries of this Holy Week and Easter. There are not many priests or bishops who will be of any great help, except to do the old Mass for Shut-ins routine.

Perhaps we can take a lesson from Edith Stein, the Jewish convert who became a Carmelite nun and was killed during the Shoah.

She knew what it meant to go without the Eucharist.

On August 4, 1942 she wrote these words from a Nazi transit camp in the Netherlands, just five days before she was killed in a gas chamber at Auschwitz:

"We are very calm and cheerful. Of course, so far there has been no Mass and communion; maybe that will come later. Now we have a chance to experience a little how to live purely from within."

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