

The background image shows the interior of a Catholic church. In the foreground, several rows of dark wooden pews are visible, receding into the distance. The church has a high, vaulted ceiling with yellow-painted ribs. Stained glass windows with colorful designs are set into the walls. Three white lanterns with gold-colored frames hang from the ceiling. The overall atmosphere is quiet and contemplative.

CATHOLICISM *after* CORONAVIRUS

A Post-COVID Guide for Catholics and Parishes

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ISBN: 978-1-943243-94-5

www.wordonfire.org

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Foreword

STEPHEN BULLIVANT

At the very end of March 2020, within a couple of days of the UK's first (of three, so far) coronavirus-induced national lockdowns, I had the idea to write a short book on the Catholic Church and pandemics. It was a stupid idea, in many ways. I was already overburdened with other work commitments, including a behind-schedule book project. My wife, a music history professor, had a full teaching load, which she would now need to do remotely from our dining room. With schools and daycare closed, we had three housebound small children of our own, and—due to other knock-on effects of the COVID crisis—another young family living with us too. But having had the idea, I fired off a quick email to my long-time friend Brandon Vogt at Word on Fire. He replied almost immediately, with reckless enthusiasm. So keen was he to publish such a book, he asked for the full manuscript in two weeks' time.

So that's how I came to write a book, sitting in bed: the only available space in an overcrowded house. It was the same bed where, irony of ironies, a couple of weeks after *that* I'd be attended by paramedics, having somehow contrived to contract COVID-19 myself. That's what we in the sociology trade call "participant-observation," though it's traditional to do it before one writes a book about one's topic. What can I say? I zig where others zag.

The book itself, *Catholicism in the Time of Coronavirus*, was intended to contextualize the emerging catastrophe in the light of Church history. Words like "unprecedented" and "unforeseeable" have, understandably enough, been used a lot over the past year or so. But that's largely because, at least in Europe and North America, we've been on an unusually good run, historically speaking, over the past century. Generally speaking, widespread outbreaks of life-threatening communicable disease have been things that happen either in history books or else in far corners of the world. Familiarity may breed contempt, but the lack of it engenders complacency. Recent years have not, as I seem to recall, exactly been short of prophecies

of looming catastrophes, from nuclear war to climate emergencies. But I suspect that if some clever data scientist were to compile a list of Most Fretted-Over Doom Scenarios, based on a content analysis of millions of news reports and social media posts, then global pandemic would not feature in the top five, and perhaps not even the top ten. If I'm honest, prior to 2020, I'd spent more time reading and worrying about the chances of a US National Park turning into a supervolcano than I had about mass contagion.¹

As G.K. Chesterton famously put it, however, the Catholic Church “is the only thing that frees a man from the degrading slavery of being a child of his age”²—and that's certainly true in this case. I was dimly aware of it when I pitched the idea for the book. I knew, for example, that epidemics had been a regular feature of life in the early Church, and indeed that Christians' response to them likely played a major role in Christianizing the Roman Empire. But it was only while writing it, and since, that I've been struck

1. And I was in very good company. On November 19, 2019, just two weeks before a few Wuhan residents began showing strange symptoms, *Scientific American* published an article entitled “Will Yellowstone Erupt Soon and Kill Us All?” by geologist Dana Hunter (<https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/rosetta-stones/will-yellowstone-erupt-soon-and-kill-us-all/>).

2. G.K. Chesterton, *Twelve Modern Apostles and Their Creeds* (New York: Duffield, 1926), 19.

by just how true this is. The Second Vatican Council states that “nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in [the followers of Christ’s] hearts,”³ and dealing with periodic plagues and their far-reaching economic, social, cultural, political, and religious side effects has been the experience of most people in most places throughout humanity’s entire history. Even cursory acquaintance with the lives of the saints shows just how true this is. In my little book, I chose to highlight two in particular: St. Cyprian, third-century theologian and bishop of Carthage, and St. Charles Borromeo, the great reforming archbishop of the Counter-Reformation in Milan (and a key inspiration for Sts. John XXIII and Paul VI), both of whom are famous for their inspirational leadership in times of plague. But there are no shortage of much more modern examples either. Many of the most-loved saints and blessed who lived in the *twentieth century* died of infectious diseases, including Gemma Galgani (tuberculosis, 1903), Francisco and Jacinta Marto (Spanish flu, 1918 and 1920), Pier Giorgio Frassati (polio, 1925), and Engelmar Unzeitig (typhoid, 1945).

3. *Gaudium et Spes*, 1, in *The Word on Fire Vatican II Collection* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Institute, 2021), 215.

Catholics have, therefore, no shortage of models and intercessors to whom we might both look and pray. Christ, whom the Scriptures liken to a physician (see Mark 2:17), has also, if in a different way, “borne our infirmities and carried our diseases” (Isa. 53:4). And it’s fortunate that we have, because the impacts of COVID-19 have in many ways been much worse than predicted. To give the most obvious example, *Catholicism in the Time of Coronavirus*, published in May 2020, states: “Initially, the most authoritative US projections put deaths between 100,000–240,000. That’s a huge and harrowing number, to be sure, though more recent projections have placed it much lower, thanks to better medical care, social distancing, and other protective methods.”⁴ At the time of writing now, on April 21, 2021, the official US death toll stands at 561,921. Meanwhile, my own country of the UK has witnessed 127,274 deaths. Globally, the number stands at over 3 million, and continues rising.⁵

All of this cannot but have immense impacts,

4. Stephen Bullivant, *Catholicism in the Time of Coronavirus* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Institute, 2020), 19.

5. All figures taken from the World Health Organization: <https://covid19.who.int>.

direct and indirect, on all areas of the Church's pastoral life and mission. These will, moreover, continue long after the current wave of infections, recoveries, and public health measures has largely abated. As the Yale sociologist and medical doctor Nicholas Christakis has recently written, pandemics are also sociological phenomena, driven by human beliefs and actions, and there is a *social* end to pandemics, too, when the fear, anxiety, and socioeconomic disruptions have either declined or simply come to be accepted as a normal fact of life.⁶

Accordingly, we're unlikely to know exactly what the "new normal" will look like in terms of sacramental practice, community activity, Mass-going rates, conversions, vocations, or charitable giving—all of which will have further knock-on effects for pastoral planning—for some years. What is certain, however, is that the Church must not simply see itself as a passive recipient of whatever *status quo* will eventually emerge. Rather, we must, *right now*, see ourselves as being in the business of shaping it. The Church's

6. Nicholas Christakis, *Apollo's Arrow: The Profound and Enduring Impact of Coronavirus on How We Live* (New York: Little, Brown, 2020), chap. 8.

pastoral and evangelistic “new normal” will, at least in part, be what we make of it.

This is something I have been at pains to stress to the several clergy audiences I’ve had the privilege of addressing over Zoom in the past few months. The situation we find ourselves in should, in a very real sense, feel quite liberating. For if there was ever a time for a parish or other form of ministry to change things around, to embark on something new, to try and set off on a new foot, it is now. In normal times, doing such things often produces a good deal of negative fallout—even very simple things like slightly moving the time of a long-established, under-attended Mass to make room for something different with a strong pastoral rationale (a Latin Mass, say, or a liturgy catering to a specific linguistic or Eastern-rite community in the local area), or finally having the courage to update the “contemporary music” Youth Mass to repertoire written after the mid-1970s. But now is not a normal time; things are already disrupted. So, now’s the chance. If the “old normal” wasn’t working, and hasn’t been for years, think of this as the opportunity to reconsider how things go.

It's time to answer Pope Francis' invitation, issued in his 2013 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, "to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style, and methods of evangelization in their respective communities."⁷ To steal a phrase by my friend Julianne Stanz from later on in these pages: "It is from the present moment that the future is built."⁸ Not every new thing you try will work, sure. But those that don't, you can honestly chalk up to "a difficult post-COVID situation."

It's for this reason, along with several others, that I'm so delighted to see this new eBook published by Word on Fire. It contains so much of what the Church so desperately needs to hear right now: bold, courageous, realistic-yet-hope-filled insights and ideas from a diverse range of the people of God's best minds and hearts: laity, clergy, and religious alike. It offers what my own earlier "widow's mite" didn't, couldn't, and wouldn't have dreamt of attempting genuine, practical advice from those on the frontlines of the Church's response to the pandemic—from God's "first responders," if I may put it like that. In these chapters you'll

7. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 33.

8. See p. 106 of this book.

find meditations, practical and profound in equal measure, on supporting the bereaved, spiritual self-care, the joy of evangelization, diaconal ministry, pedagogy and pastoral care, presbyteral ministry, the centrality of the parish, the works of mercy, creative means of pastoral accompaniment, authentic community, reading (incidentally, something St. Charles Borromeo also encouraged; he distributed free books to his locked-down flock, like a sixteenth-century Dolly Parton), parish communications, and the religious life. Something for everyone, then. Which is fitting. Because the Church has something—and of infinite value—for everyone too.

And it's our task to help them (and one another) to realize it, and to do so playing whatever hand it is we've been dealt.

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Grief in the Time of COVID-19

BETH L. HEWETT

When my husband died, the only reason I could be with him was that he wanted to die at home. Home hospice is no picnic, I'll tell you. But, at the hospital, COVID meant I couldn't come visit him. We couldn't bear that. But when will I get to have a funeral? His ashes are in an urn on my mantel, and there's been no way to get my family here.

She died without me. We were life partners and, while she wasn't an easy person, dementia made her different, softer somehow while also more frightened. At the long-term-care home, the staff would tell me how much it mattered that I visited because she ate better that day and slept better that night. But I couldn't visit her with COVID, and the videos they sent showed her rapidly declining. It just broke my heart. The isolation

of COVID killed her just as surely as dementia did, and I wasn't there to hold her hand.

I work at a nursing home, and I swear that the people on my unit are dying faster than ever. Some from COVID, sure, but others from sheer inertia. Their families can't visit, and they can't spend time in mutual activities because we need to keep them separate. Well, their deaths haunt me. And I have to say that so many of my coworkers and their families seem to be dying, too. Were there always this many deaths in a year or am I just noticing them now?

In our new senior living community, there's a grief group being held in the chapel because so many people are grieving—mostly old losses and not COVID but some from COVID. In the chapel, we're all spaced six feet apart, and so many people are hard of hearing anyway. People are getting mad and just walking out. It's not helping my wife and me. And we miss our son so much.

I work as a bereavement specialist, and the people

whose stories I have just shared are Catholic. They are stunned by loss and sometimes incoherent in grief. Here, I share how and why the COVID-19 pandemic has changed people's experiences of grief and what we, as Catholics, can do to support one another.

To put a fine point on this country's COVID-19 virus experience, I ask: Who hasn't noticed that life and death have changed in this time of COVID? An unprecedented number of people in the current American generation have become acutely aware of the pain of death and loss during the past year. Death and loss seem to be everywhere. For example, there are approximately 2,854,838 deaths in the US annually per the CDC's 2019 figures.¹ Given the 2020–2021 pandemic, there likely are more deaths than normal; on March 7, 2021, the CDC had counted more than half a million (522,973) virus deaths.²

Nearly everyone knows someone who has had COVID, and many know people who have died this past year (of COVID and other causes). Furthermore,

1. "Deaths and Morality," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/deaths.htm>.

2. "United States COVID-19 Cases, Deaths, and Laboratory Testing (NAATs) by State, Territory, and Jurisdiction," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), March 7, 2021, https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#cases_casesper100klast7days.

many people have lost jobs, businesses, and economic security while others are just slogging through life and work at home with children who are schooling remotely. At the very least, people's awareness of death and loss has heightened.

From a bereavement perspective, I hear a lot about how challenging grief is. Grief always has been challenging, but the North American response generally is to deny the impact of loss and encourage ourselves and others to “move on.” After a typical three-day bereavement leave, most people must go back to work. After a month or two, cards and letters stop coming and calls are less frequent. After six months, family and friends have heard all about the loss and are at their own loss about what to say. America is a death-denying society that encourages violence in our movies, TV shows, music, and games but cannot bear to acknowledge the pain of genuine loss. In fact, many people just don't know how to let themselves grieve. Therefore, as a microcosm of America—at around 51 million, about one-fifth of

the total population³—Catholics have seen all too little support in their grief.

A culturally focusing event

Yet right now grief is touching more people simultaneously and in higher levels of intensity than many previously experienced. With the World War II generation dying out and the lesser overall societal impacts of more recent warfare, our current generations have not undergone a culturally focusing event that affects nearly everyone. We are uncertain how to process this pandemic. In a way, the problem is not how many people have died because of this virus but how many people have become aware of death, loss, and grief through it.

People are more universally aware of losses and grief overall. Ironically, the isolation necessary to protect ourselves has made us more attuned to others' sorrow. Everyone has had to give up something—albeit to differing degrees of magnitude—from toilet

3. David Masci and Gregory A. Smith, “7 Facts About American Catholics,” Pew Research Center, October 10, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/10/7-facts-about-american-catholics/>.

paper to food security. To our mutual benefit, many people have gained an increased awareness of societal sorrows beyond death, like a newly acquired consciousness of racism's generational effects and economic inequities.

One of the problems we face is that a specific end to the pandemic remains hard to define. Without an end in sight, we cannot yet dismiss the pain of grief—as we normally might do—so we must muddle through in physical isolation and without a sure way to talk about our individual and collective grief. And we need support.

Support from the Catholic Church

The Church should provide some of that support, but can it do so?

In 2020, statewide efforts to quell the pandemic led to churches first being closed to parishioners and then, once churches were allowed to reopen, to requirements allowing fewer people to attend Mass, leaving those who were unable to be in the physical church with live streaming and video recordings of Mass. For

people without access to such technologies, there is no access at all to the Mass. For many parishes, this limited opening of churches has meant lower revenue from parishioners' financial gifts and, subsequently, layoffs of parish staff and reduced hours for parish offices. These reductions result in a loop of closed or limited ministries. Just when the Church is most needed, the ability to aid anyone is most restricted. Yet old needs and demands are still there. New needs and demands also must be addressed. And everyone will have to make do with reduced resources. During pandemic times or other situations of isolation, limited resources simply are not enough. People are expressing increased feelings of depression, guilt, anger, fear, loneliness—all of the feelings that tend to come with grief. Clergy are expressing exhaustion and worry about carrying COVID to parishioners or getting it from them.

The Church tries to help us, but in many ways, we are left to our own devices. What can we do about our grief? How can we work with pain and sorrow to help one another and ourselves?

Grief, mourning, and Jesus

First, we need to learn about the nature of grief. Grief is an internal experience of the loss that comes on us unbidden, passively, and often explosively upon a loved one's death or another loss. It's not about drama or feeling sorry for ourselves; it's all about the internal knowledge that someone we love is gone or something we care about has changed forever. Mourning is an external expression of grief that we enact with crying, talking about the loss, memorializing and honoring who or what is gone, and integrating the grief into our lives—changing us forever, too. Therefore, it's not surprising that Jesus taught, “Blessed are those who mourn” (Matt. 5:4).

Although we might not think so when we feel the worst of it, grief brings its own gifts. Grief usually doesn't feel like a gift, but in many ways, it is just that. Grief is always about love. We don't grieve that which is not somehow precious to us, whether it is a person, job, expectation, or something else. Grief simply is the cost of loving someone or something, and the love we have experienced usually is worth the price we pay.

It's also important to know that grief represents the sorrow, pain, fear, regret, anger, and other emotions that God has provided to help us feel and acknowledge loss. God didn't give us the pain of loss without giving us ways to work with it. Look at Jesus. He allowed himself to weep, feeling Lazarus's loss and the collective sorrow of Lazarus's family, even when he knew he would raise Lazarus from the dead. One thing we learn from Jesus' weeping is that even though we're assured of the resurrection, we can have and express sorrowful feelings without worrying that we're faulty Christians. If God's Son could weep openly at a friend's death, a friend who shortly would be raised to life, so can we.

We become more fully human when we face loss. Jesus himself experienced many sorrows in his brief earthly life. In addition to weeping for Lazarus and his loved ones, Jesus faced the devastating fact that his home community of Nazareth wanted no part of the former carpenter when he became a prophet and teacher. Jesus quickly saw all the pain of the world when he began his ministry, healing and comforting the sick and wounded. He expressed deep sorrow

at Gethsemane and prayed that his Father might “remove this cup” from him (Luke 22:42). Yes, Jesus knew human grief and its pain, and so do we.

But Jesus’ death didn’t stop his experiences of human grief. On the road to Emmaus, an unrecognized, resurrected Jesus walked with two grieving disciples who were bewildered by the Crucifixion and the reports of the empty tomb. He became their companion in grief, hearing their pain as they walked and then consoling them through Scripture, giving them hope. To be a *companion* literally means to break bread together, which Jesus did with these bereaved men before he disappeared before their eyes.

Dwelling with grief

Grief can hurt so much that we may want to get out of it, and that’s the root of the common idea that we shouldn’t grieve for long and that we should “move on” with our lives. Yet we must dwell with grief for a time because if it is ignored, it will remain within our bodies, souls, and spirits. Grief doesn’t go away just because we don’t want to feel it. Because it comes from

inside us, our grief knows precisely where to take us physically in the world, soulfully into deep areas of our psyche, and spiritually on a quest to higher ground. Listening to what our grief tells us and mourning it intentionally are critical to who we are, who we will be, and how we will love in the future. In other words, grief and mourning change us, and how we deal with them helps to determine how we will change.

In grief, we cross a threshold from our old lives into the new. Betwixt and between the old and the new, we reside for a while in a middle space of great mystery, called a *liminal space*. This space is between the old life that we knew and the new life into which we are entering. Existing in this middle space can be frightening or, at the least, off-putting. Sometimes people express that they feel like they are going “crazy,” but they really are just grieving. Interestingly, this middle space also can be a resting place between the events that brought about the grief and the hard work of mourning yet to come. People I’ve worked with recently have expressed that they’re in this oddly discomfiting middle space right now. For example, because of the necessary isolation of COVID

self-protection, they are in between: they want and need the social support they're not fully getting by being isolated at home, but they're also grateful they don't need to turn down social invitations they don't feel up to.

Once we experience deep loss and work to mourn that loss, we enter into a new period of human life. Now we realize that we must become more tolerant of our pain individually and collectively. Remarkably, it's good for us as humans and as Christians to experience sorrow and to support one another in that experience. We need to learn the benefits of grief in terms of communion with God who sacrificed his Son, in communion and compassion with others, and in leaps of human growth (painfully gained as they may be).

A spiritual act of mercy

As a Church family, we need better ways to provide such support to one another. Fortunately, the Catholic Church offers us a way forward. The *Order of Christian Funerals* outlines the basics of a Ministry

of Consolation, which reflects one of the spiritual acts of mercy:

So too when a member of Christ's Body dies, the faithful are called to a ministry of consolation to those who have suffered the loss of one whom they love. Christian consolation is rooted in that hope that comes from faith in the saving death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.⁴

There was once a National Catholic Ministry to the Bereaved that followed the precepts of a Ministry of Consolation and trained and commissioned bereavement facilitators. The pandemic is teaching us—clergy and laypeople—that we need to reestablish such a ministry in which those who are called to walk with the bereaved can learn why and how best to do so and then tone anothers.

We can be grief companions to one another. Once appropriately trained, we have much latitude to assist the bereaved in a wide variety of ways: through a robust parish ministry, with individual support, and

4. *Order of Christian Funerals*, no. 8.

in support groups. Our basic Ministry of Consolation is to love one another, and our extended ministry is to use our knowledge of grief and mourning to listen to, walk with, and help bereaved people find their way—often through a quiet presence that simply bears witness to pain and sorrow.

Living blessed lives

Our lives are not about us. This is a message Bishop Robert Barron often teaches. We learn that lesson most dearly when someone we love has died or when something most important in our lives has changed. The lesson becomes clear, because we realize at a deep level that we have no control over most losses in life.

These significant losses bring grief. Paradoxically, times of grief are when we most need to make our lives about ourselves, so we can focus on doing the hard work of mourning. Just when we begin to understand that the world is bigger than us and our individual needs, we can't get out of our own way because our pain is too great, and we must be consoled. We now see that others also suffer, and we want to live meaningful and

purposeful lives even while we are too bereaved to make that happen. Grief offers an opportunity to make our lives about something bigger than ourselves. How do we get from here to there? We need support from others, but people can only help us if they, too, have realized that their lives are not about them but about what they can do for others.

Both now and post-pandemic, think: How would our world change if even a few of the 51 million American Catholics were fully supported in grief? And if a few of them turned around to support others, how might they further change the world for others who grieve?

Pope St. Leo the Great taught that “the person who shows love and compassion to those in any kind of affliction is blessed, not only with the virtue of good will but also with the gift of peace.”⁵ So many blessings can come merely from attending to those who grieve through a Ministry of Consolation. One of those blessings just might be that someone will be available as a

5. Leo the Great, *Sermo 6 de Quadragesima*, 1–2, “Office of Readings, Second Reading, Thursday after Ash Wednesday,” *The Liturgy of the Hours*, vol. 2, *Lenten Season—Easter Season*, (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1976), 60.

companion to us in our own future griefs, whatever those may be.

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You Can't Give What You Don't Have

BOBBY ANGEL

You can't give what you don't have. I had to relearn this simple spiritual lesson painfully this past summer when I felt far from the love and peace of Jesus Christ.

I think collectively all of our 2020 hopes and dreams were altered when we came face-to-face with a global pandemic and a summer of racial unrest. As a parent and Catholic school teacher, I'm accustomed to my children and students looking to me as if I had sufficient wisdom and life experience to explain everything. Like the majority of the world, I had zero answers in the face of those difficult months, and what looked to be a quiet summer provided no emotional or mental respite.

Ultimately, I realized that unless I re-centered my life on Christ and the peace that only he could give, there was no hope for me to offer any peace to my

students, colleagues, or children. It was a lesson that took some time and humility for me to realize, but 2020 became a season of real transforming grace from the Lord.

Hitting the wall

I worked for over eight years at an all-boys Catholic school in Anaheim, California. The 2020 school year took the most abrupt turn anyone in our lifetime had experienced once the COVID-19 pandemic hit American shores and the entire fourth quarter became solely online learning. Some teachers were already tech-savvy, while some didn't know how to check their email. Yet all were expected to quickly make sense of the digital tools of Zoom, Google Meet, and many other apps to bring the school year to its completion.

The students effectively left for spring break and then never physically came back. Watching my boys miss out on their prom, spring sports, and graduation ceremony was difficult, and I made myself available to them for conversations and support as I saw

the isolation and depression taking their toll. The beginning of the new school year in the fall brought the same sentiments of confusion, frustration, and a simple desire for the return to normalcy.

Spiritually, I felt the pain of separation from the sacraments. Like many of you, I was fed by the virtual Mass offerings from Bishop Barron, Fr. Steve Grunow, and priests from all over the country. It certainly helped me to keep my finger on the pulse of the liturgical season. But virtual Mass is not an adequate substitute, given the incarnate nature of our faith: the real matter of the sacraments we receive, the beauty of our church buildings, and the faces of the people of God. We are an embodied people, and God desires to feed us with the Eucharist, the physical Bread of Life. That reality can't be replicated through a screen.

Living in California proved especially difficult as the restrictions on businesses and churches continued to change from week to week. For a brief time, we were able to worship indoors, but then the state again mandated outdoor worship only. Signing up for time slots for Mass on clunky parish websites and dealing with ushers refusing to allow us entry because we

were “over the quota” of participants left a bad taste in my mouth, for shouldn’t the Church, of all places, be the site of open arms and hospitality? I understood the difficulty for each diocese and parish—having to deal with health concerns and potential legal repercussions—but my frustration was real.

Then came the death of George Floyd and the summer of protests, riots, and important conversations on race and reconciliation in the world and within the Church as well. Many important conversations ensued and are still being had, but the physical isolation of COVID only added to the social isolation and feelings of helplessness. The combination of feeling ineffective against the global virus, social unrest, and a church building that I wasn’t allowed to enter took a real toll on me as a man, a teacher, a husband, and a father. I retreated from social media and the twenty-four-hour news cycle and decided to simply be with my family and rebuild my prayer life. My family and my students needed my presence more than my attempted answers to the pain of the world. Like Mary at the foot of the cross on Calvary,

sometimes all you can do is quietly stand in the suffering with others.

I couldn't give what I didn't have, and I needed to reclaim in my daily life the centrality of Christ.

Find the center

Bishop Barron's constant reminder to "find the center" means to put Christ at the absolute center of all our activity. Whenever we put anything else at the center of our lives—fame, work, social media, money, pleasure—we naturally go off-kilter. Or as C.S. Lewis puts it: "Put first things first and we get second things thrown in: put second things first & we lose *both* first and second things."¹

I struggled throughout 2020 to keep Christ at the center of my life. I had found myself caught up in the loop of refreshing news feeds and checking social media to an unhealthy degree. I felt I had to know any updates on COVID or the George Floyd situation as soon as they emerged. I had to be the teacher who

1. C.S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis*, vol. 3, *Narnia, Cambridge, and Joy, 1950–1963*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 111.

was up-to-date on it all. To be out of “the know” in the modern world seems to be a cardinal sin.

The inherent danger in this endless refreshing is that we are anchoring ourselves to nothing of lasting use in a storm that will happily drown us with more and more content. There is always more news; there is always more social media gossip to consume. Nothing in this world fully satisfies our infinite thirst except Christ. The incarnate Word of God is our firm footing and our only truly safe harbor. Once that center is established (or reestablished), nourished, and protected, we can discern and move through our worlds of work, news, and relationships to bring light into the darkness.

For me, this meant a retreat from the internet, regrouping with my family, and establishing a routine of daily prayer. I got back into daily Scripture and leading our family in praying the Rosary together. Peace quickly reemerged, as if God was saying, “Ah, finally. Welcome back.” As a theology teacher, of course, I could advise students on the necessity of daily prayer for a happy and grounded life, but it’s easier said than done. I had to learn to take my own medicine.

Get back in the game

“Not to preach the Gospel would be my undoing,”² wrote Pope St. Paul VI, quoting his namesake (see 1 Cor. 9:16). This statement resonated with me deeply, for it challenged me throughout the remainder of 2020 to get out of any self-pity or fearful withdrawal and to get back in the game of evangelization. Some of us have been given classrooms, others social media platforms, others a book club, others an office space, others their own homes—whatever space God has given us, we must bring the fire of the Holy Spirit into those arenas. It is only the Spirit of God that can bear the fruits of charity, joy, peace, patience, and generosity.

St. Paul urges us to set our minds on Christ and put to death the vices that keep him from being our center, so that we can forgive, love, and renew one another (see Col. 3:5–17). St. John Chrysostom, the saint with whom I share my birthday, described putting on Christ as “never to be forsaken of Him, and

2. Pope Paul VI, Office of Readings: Second Reading, Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, *Liturgy of the Hours*, vol. 3, *Ordinary Time, Weeks 1–17* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1975), 418.

His always being seen in us through our holiness, through our gentleness.”³ We must quiet ourselves and be still in the face of endless distractions in order to receive this transformative grace.

Of course, any retreat or regrouping that we take in our interior life can’t become a wall that we hide behind to never engage the world again. Christ has called us all to evangelize and spread the Gospel to the ends of the earth. We all need to step back from news, social media, and endless busyness when we become overwhelmed and recenter ourselves on God, the Divine Author who is guiding and sustaining all things. But like a boxer encouraged by his coach in the corner of the mat, once we are composed and refreshed, God wants us back in the ring.

The blessing of being a father is that my time is never solely mine. I’ve grown accustomed to the fact that I can’t totally retreat from the world. As much as I may want to hunker down and be a monk who reads all day, my life is no longer my own. This has been a lesson I’ve painfully learned over the years, but one that brings lasting joy, for the grain of wheat

3. Quoted in C.E.B. Cranfield, *Epistle to the Romans 9–16* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 688–689.

must die in order to bear much fruit (see John 12:24). For all of us called by Christ, sitting on the sidelines is not an option.

Sometimes this means we serve in quiet ways and sometimes in radical ways that upend our entire lives. At the very end of 2020, my wife and I accepted new positions at the Word on Fire Institute. It's been a major lesson in Franciscan-type detachment as we moved our family of six across the country and are currently living in a renovation war zone. We don't need much to be happy, and we don't have much time on earth to do good. My wife and I want to be sure that we keep Christ at the center of our family so that whatever 2021 and the years to come bring, we can offer a broken world the love of Jesus Christ because he loved us first (see 1 John 4:19).

You can't give what you don't have. So be sure that, before all else, you find time to be still and put on the love of Jesus Christ.

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Be Not Discouraged

CHIKA ANYANWU

When you fail to measure up to your Christian privilege, be not discouraged for discouragement is a form of pride. The reason you are sad is because you looked to yourself and not to God; to your failing, not to His love. . . . God is biased in your favor. . . . God is more lenient than you because He is perfectly good and, therefore, loves you more.¹

—VENERABLE FULTON SHEEN

Toward the end of March 2020, I picked up my guitar for the first time in many months, opened my music book to an easy G-chord praise song, and proceeded to play the concert of my life in my bedroom. But just three minutes in, my callus-less fingers were already throbbing from the steel strings digging into my skin. As much as I imagined myself praising along with the angels and saints for my audience of One, I only knew five chords, had learned only one

1. Fulton Sheen, *Preface to Religion* (New York: P.J. Kenedy and Sons, 1946), 126.

strum pattern that wasn't the right fit for the song, and couldn't play and sing at the same time. I put my guitar aside and began to pout over my hurt fingers and hurt feelings. All I wanted to do was sing praises to the Lord and be good at it, like everyone else who seemed to pick up new talents so easily during quarantine. But what did I expect? I hadn't touched my guitar in over nine months, and before that, I rarely practiced consistently.

This is the story of my life, and maybe you can relate to it. You just want to be skilled at something right from the start. You don't want it to be hard or difficult but to come naturally and without much tension.

Like going to the gym once and then looking in the mirror expecting to see dramatic results, you might have gone to a conference or retreat—pre-COVID—and had a life-changing encounter with the Lord, and then expected peace and joy to be automatically and permanently instilled into your life, and for the future to be effortless. You might even be surprised when temptations arise, and all the more shocked when you choose to give in to those temptations. And now

there's a pandemic, an increase in racial and civil unrest, and economic uncertainty. Peace and joy may have been replaced by worry and anger.

You said “yes” to Jesus and the Christian life, but why is it so hard to live it out?

Like any relationship that is worth attention, we want our relationship with the Lord to start strong and stay strong. Most of our holy brothers and sisters, like Blessed Anne-Marie Javouhey, Venerable Matt Talbot, and Blessed Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi, can attest to the fact that discipleship is a continuous choice of amending our lives through prayer and practice.

Jesus' first words in the Gospel of Mark call us to a life that is markedly different than the lives of those who choose not to believe. “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15). By inviting us to repent, Jesus isn't just calling us to change our bad habits and attitudes. He's inviting us to *metanoia*—an encounter with him that leads to a rejection of sin and a deep *change of heart*. Or as Pope St. Paul VI puts it in his apostolic constitution *Paenitemini*: “That intimate

and total change and renewal of the entire man—of all his opinions, judgments, and decisions—which takes place in him in the light of the sanctity and charity of God.”²

A life with Christ should change us from the inside out, but oftentimes our own humanity fails us, and we are left with our patience and stamina wavering. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* acknowledges the “struggle of conversion”: that although we are washed clean of original sin by the waters of Baptism, the inclination to sin—also known as concupiscence—still rages within us.³ We can all relate to the spiritual battle of St. Paul when he says, “I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (Rom. 7:15). Sin and complacency lure us away from the light and draw us into darkness so that, even when it seems from the outside that we are engaged disciples of Jesus, we are actually pouring new wine into old wineskins. The radical altering of our lives is a process in which we love God above all things and love our neighbor

2. Pope Paul VI, *Paenitemini*, ch. 1, apostolic constitution, Vatican website, February 17, 1966, http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-vi_apc_19660217_paenitemini.html.

3. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1426, Vatican website, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM.

as ourselves. It is not easy, but the love that we give and receive is not our own; rather, it is the Father's love within us that makes us capable of doing what is impossible on our own.

And his love requires a response of profound humility from us to join with our Savior and say to the Father, "Not my will but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). Every day we are called to intentional living in which we put into action the grace of God to "put away your former way of life, your old self . . . [and] clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph. 4:22, 24). How do we do this? Through prayer and practice.

As much as I want to be a guitarist and play praise songs, I can't do it if I'm not familiar with my instrument or how to play it. I have to spend time getting to know it and practicing. Similarly, to live a life of discipleship, we need to spend time getting to know Jesus and practicing virtue in order to live out our relationship with him and others.

We start with prayer. Prayer is less complicated than we make it out to be, and just like going to the

gym, usually the hardest part is showing up. We overthink what is supposed to happen and what we're supposed to get out of it. Jesus just wants us to show up and *be* with him in an encounter of listening and speaking, receiving grace and giving praise, being loved and loving. What a beautiful exchange!

What does prayer look like? God is creative, and our time with him doesn't have to be the same each day. Dive into the wealth of opportunities the Lord has given us: attending Holy Mass, reading Scripture, listening to music, praying the Rosary, doing the Ignatian examen, spending time in silence, appreciating nature, and so on. Commit to a specific time each day to spend thirty minutes with the Lord, and if you do more, great! If you do less, great! Just do it!

The more time we spend with Jesus, the more we will want to be like him and practice virtue. A virtue is a habit that is formed from the desire to do good. Whether it's faith, hope, charity, prudence, justice, temperance, or fortitude, virtue "allows the person not only to perform good acts, but to give the best of himself. The virtuous person tends toward the good with all his sensory and spiritual powers; he pursues

the good and chooses it in concrete actions.”¹ When we see ourselves growing in virtue, it is a good indicator that we’re maturing in the spiritual life and that maturation is a product of consistent prayer and a commitment to *metanoia*.

It’s amazing how grace builds upon grace. From the gift of conversion, we come to a desire to intimately love the Lord. We then act upon that love by practicing virtue. “Practice makes perfect” is a false cliché, but “practice builds virtue” is true. Do not be discouraged by failures, mistakes, sins, or shortcomings. The God of all creation still loves you.

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1. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1803.

Always Lead with Love

DEACON HAROLD BURKE-SIVERS

The implementation of COVID-19 restrictions in March 2020 completely turned my ministry upside down.

During the first night of a parish mission in Scottsdale, Arizona, a letter arrived from Bishop Olmsted shutting everything down: no meetings, no social gatherings, and no Masses. I was on a plane home the next morning and remained home (with a few sporadic exceptions) for the next nine months. Most of my speaking engagements and domestic travel during that time were rescheduled or pivoted to virtual events. All international trips were canceled or postponed. I normally travel about 250,000 miles every year, but the pandemic reduced my travel in 2020 to less than 5,000 miles.

My ministry in the parish was also curtailed. Only priests were allowed to conduct hospital calls and to

bring Communion to the homebound and those in assisted living communities. Prison visits were out. I spent the first month at home feeling angry and helpless, asking myself over and over again, “What now?”

After a while, I began to think of COVID-19 as a spiritual stop sign on the road of life—a time to pause to look left and ask, “How did I get here?”, then look right and ask, “Where am I going?” I prayerfully meditated on all the events in my life that led me to this moment and tried to discern what God was saying and how I was to exercise the ministry entrusted to me in the midst of a worldwide pandemic.

The challenges to family life during COVID-19 have been many: financial instability; massive increases in internet pornography use; rising incidents of domestic violence; unresolved issues in marriages, which are now surfacing and causing tension and division; and limited or no access to Mass, Reconciliation, and Eucharistic Adoration. However, I believe there are tremendous opportunities for me to expand my service array in order to provide dynamic ministry in difficult times. New doors to ministry and evangelization have been opened by COVID-19, and I

concluded that I must step up to meet the challenges of a hurting world desperately in need of God's loving mercy and healing touch.

While it is true that deacons assist parish priests, which is what most parishioners see deacons doing on a daily basis, the deacon's primary ministerial responsibility in a post-pandemic world will be to assist the bishop with his duty of evangelization that takes place *outside* of the parish: in the encounter with widows, atheists, prisoners, the indifferent, the indigent, the homeless, racists, the fallen away, the disenfranchised—those who neither attend Mass nor are enrolled in the parish. These are people on the margins who have fallen through the cracks, who no one sees, who live in the shadows. Simply said, deacons can reach people the parish priest cannot. After encountering the marginalized and sharing the Gospel, the deacon, like the friends of the paralytic on the stretcher in Luke's Gospel, brings them to the healing ministry of the priest.

By our Baptism, the call of the Lord is going out to each one of us, ordained and lay. Are we ready to answer? Are we ready to follow? Is anxiety, pride, or

an unwillingness to detach ourselves from the things of this world preventing us from the total freedom that radical conversion brings? Our Lord says, “No one who puts a hand on the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62). Now is the time to put our lives in order, to reexamine our priorities, and to put Christ first in our lives, above and before all else. But the question is: How do we do this? I would like to suggest four practical avenues: 1) pray more, 2) promote racial justice, 3) rely on your deacons, and 4) become a vehicle of God’s mercy.

Pray more

God literally loves us to death. He sent his only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, to die in order to show us that in freely giving up that which is most precious to us—our very lives—in order to do the Father’s will, God will give us everlasting life. Jesus shows us that even in the darkest hour of our lives, God’s love knows no end. In the hardships of everyday life, God’s love knows no bounds. In our suffering and death, God’s love holds nothing back.

Jesus prayed before he went to the cross, and it is precisely during these dry, dark periods—when we are forced to pray in the midst of anxiety—that we are led into the very heart of Christ’s Paschal Mystery. *The real cross of prayer is to believe that Jesus is Lord of every single situation in our lives.* Nothing can separate us from the love of God, and how we respond to the Lord’s activity in our lives reflects our trust in his love for us. If we want prayer to become a part of who we are, we must wait on God and have complete confidence in his mercy and love.

We pray because we love; we pray because we want to deepen and strengthen our relationship with God; we pray because we want to give ourselves to God; we pray because prayer moves us from knowing about God to knowing God. This is why we must enter into the wilderness: we must enter into that place of letting go. In the wilderness, we pray to know God, to experience the power of his Resurrection, and to share in the very suffering of Christ.

The Mystery of Christ’s Passion, Death, and Resurrection always calls us to a new life. A new life requires us to let go of the old, just as faith requires

that we surrender everything to God. Surrendering and “letting go” is never easy, and we must look to Jesus as our example of what it means to make a gift of our life, because it is in giving ourselves away in love that we truly find ourselves in God. When we pray, we ask God to lower the walls that we’ve erected between him and ourselves, so that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus enters into our most guarded places, desiring to set us free to love. Christ allows us to see and understand that by the power of God and none other, we can be transformed by prayer. During this COVID-19 pandemic, we must take our hands off the steering wheel and let God drive. We must empty ourselves of sin so that God can fill us with his love. We must die to the ways of this world so that Christ can live in us.

Promote racial justice

Catholics can help to quell racial injustice and unrest. We can take the lead in facilitating effective change through dialogue and understanding where communication barriers are shattered and respectful dialogue

is opened between those in power and the disenfranchised. Through seeds sown in hearts open to change, the Holy Spirit can now grow them into commitments to building integrity, sharing wisdom, and imparting knowledge that can lead to a harvest of love and change. Reaching out with compassion to those of different races and hearing their stories, responding with empathy, and working through differences with humble, contrite hearts can create a harmonic of love that will reverberate throughout our land.

Post-COVID-19, parishes can host and attend cultural events in the parish or diocese where the customs and traditions of other races can be appreciated and celebrated, not feared and caricatured. This includes cross-pollination within parishes where the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass includes authentic and reverent cultural expressions that acknowledge the unique gifts we all bring to the Body of Christ without violating liturgical norms. Deacons can facilitate study groups in parishes to discuss Church documents on racism.

As faithful Catholics, we can no longer allow secular culture and ideology—with its promulgation of

subjective, relativistic truth—to displace the objective, absolute truth of Catholic doctrine and principles. In order to help defeat the devil and his mendacity, we must engage in broader introspection and a deeper examination of conscience in order to arrive at the root cause of the disunity and divisiveness within us that leads to sinful actions—where we see ourselves and worldly principles as the autonomous center of all truth. The faithful can accomplish this by uniting the principles of Catholic social teaching (particularly “solidarity”) with the Beatitudes, so that faith becomes not simply “what we do” but “who we are.”

Rely on your deacons

The role of diaconal preaching outside of liturgical services is to help the Word make the transition to practical life. The deacon must break open the Holy Scriptures so that the eyes of the faithful are opened to recognize the presence of the living God in their midst. These provide incredible opportunities for sharing the Gospel, especially for those who have

fallen away from the faith or do not know the Lord at all.

While on a recent speaking tour in Australia, I mentioned an observation I had made after numerous conversations with young people from around the world: they have no idea how much God loves them. After the talk, a young priest approached me and said, “Deacon, you are spot on. I’d like to share with you an experience I had that will drive your point home”:

When I was first ordained, I taught theology at a Catholic high school. One day, as an experiment, I wrote on one side of the blackboard “I believe in God” and on the other side of the board “I don’t believe in God,” then asked the students to stand under the statement that best represented what they believed. Almost all of the students stood under the statement “I believe in God” and only a few students stood under the statement “I don’t believe in God.”

After they sat down, I erased the two statements and replaced them with “God loves me” and “God doesn’t love me,” then asked the students to, once again, stand under the statement that best represented what they

believed. Not one student stood under the statement “God loves me.” A handful of students stood under the statement “God doesn’t love me.” The remaining students stayed at their desks because they weren’t sure.

My heart sank. The Scriptures are clear: “So we know and believe the love God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1 John 4:16). Why isn’t this the experience of young people today? What role can deacons play to help reverse this trend during COVID-19?

Deacons can help young people realize these truths:

- The material things of this world are fleeting and will not bring the happiness, satisfaction, or joy that they are searching for: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth . . . but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven. . . . For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:19–21).
- Their choices significantly impact the lives of others: “Each of us will be accountable to God. Let us

therefore . . . resolve . . . never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another” (Rom. 14:12–13).

- The actions they take and the decisions they make today have eternal consequences: “Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit” (Gal. 6:7–8).
- What they truly desire is loving and life-giving communion with God: “It was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother’s breast. On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God” (Ps. 22:9–10).

This advice to young people also parallels the advice given to Solomon by his father, David: “Keep the charge of the LORD your God, walking in his ways and keeping his statutes, his commandments, his ordinances, and his testimonies, as it is written in the law of Moses, so that you may prosper in all that

you do” (1 Kings 2:3). David helps his son understand that following God’s law does not enslave you but truly sets you free. Like David, deacons must help this generation of young people appreciate the paradoxes of faith: that the cross, an instrument of death, is actually the vehicle for eternal life.

Become a vehicle of God’s mercy

A Samaritan, in the eyes of the Jews, was an unwanted foreigner and a despised outsider. Yet this stranger in Jesus’ parable—presumed to have nothing of God’s merciful and compassionate Spirit—gives the Jewish man lying on the ground the attention that the clerics refused to give. In fact, the Samaritan went to extraordinary lengths to take care of the injured man, sparing no expense.

Let’s be honest: What would you have done in that situation? It’s easy to say, in retrospect, “I would help him.” But what if the almost dead man was a pedophile? A member of a white supremacist group? A brutal rapist or serial killer? As you pass him along the roadside fully aware of the gravity of his sins, you

may experience righteous anger tinged with the bitterness of raw emotion. The feelings of rage, contempt, and disdain are tangible. “You deserve it!” you say to yourself. Would you truly care if the person lived or died? Would you leave him lying there and not give him a second thought?

What if the roles were reversed? As you lie there in agony on the side of the road, the weight of your sins and the pain they have caused overwhelm you. You realize that you are a sinner in need of God’s mercy. You are waiting for God to answer your prayers for comfort and support. One person after another walks by, barely able to look at you. When they do, the piercing stares of disgust are like daggers in your soul. Alone and scared, the thought crosses your mind that you may die . . . and no one will care. You say to yourself, “Why won’t anyone help me?”

COVID-19 has presented new challenges in our day. The persons seeking assistance now are those who have lost their jobs and businesses, those who cannot pay their rent, those who have limited or no access to medications, those who are isolated from family and friends in elder care facilities, those who

are incarcerated, and those who are frontline health-care workers. Our advocacy for real change from a Catholic perspective during the pandemic leads to this truth: if we are to defeat the evil of sin, we must always lead with love. We must be the Good Samaritan.

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Catholic Schools after COVID

DR. EMILY DAHDAH

The discovery of the novel viral infection known as COVID-19 hit K–12 schools in the United States with full force in March 2020. From closing school buildings and pausing all in-person learning to making the unprecedented effort to provide universal education via “distance learning methods,” COVID-19 pushed educators to fundamentally change the way they educated children.

During those early months of the pandemic, it was said again and again that we school leaders were in “unprecedented times.” That phrase is true in some ways, but it is largely insufficient to describe the situation for Catholic school leaders. The COVID-19 crisis has certainly been unprecedented in the particular details of its impact on education: What kindergarten teacher ever tried to “teach” via Zoom foundational math concepts to a “class” full of energetic

six-year-olds? What school ever offered virtually their entire educational curriculum to children who did not have a computer or internet access at home? How would schools bridge the learning gap of students who returned to school never having logged into a single distance-learning lesson?

Certainly, these *particular* challenges were unique, and they were shared by all schools, including Catholic schools. In more important ways, though, the overarching contours of the COVID-19 challenge are just another variation on the same theme that Catholics have faced since we first started schools in the United States. Catholic schools were founded on the premise that Catholics have a tradition of educating that is essential to our children and their futures and fundamentally different from what is offered in other US schools. These differences are not found in things like our commitment to academic excellence, our dedicated efforts to close the achievement gap, or our work to support at-risk families. We share these elements with all K–12 educational institutions. Rather, the difference is found in our belief that any good education must be grounded in faith and reason.

The Catholic educational tradition holds that *faith and reason together* form a single lens that allows us to understand ourselves and know the world—from math and science to literature and music—in the clearest possible way. Faith and reason hold out the truth that the created world is good, and is to be studied, understood, and put at the service of the human family so that each member can find their true end. The goal for each person is to partake in the life of God, to be filled with intelligence, life, light, beauty, and all things that are good. This is the magnificent destiny of all of us. The Catholic educational tradition holds firm to these perennial truths about who we are and what is good. They are always in season, the freshest, most invigorating truths at the foundation of the greatest accomplishments of human history, from the scientific revolution and its extraordinary advances to democracy and individual rights.

The truths of the Catholic tradition remain remarkably stable and give us roots to grow deep and strong in a rapidly changing world. Formed in this way of seeing the world through faith and right reason, the next generation is privileged to receive the riches of

the Catholic tradition in their entirety so that young people are prepared to take on the specific challenges of their world and work hard to order it toward the good. Young people are thus equipped to embrace the world as it truly is, seeing through all other biases that cloud true vision. They are prepared to live a deep and meaningful life in a beautiful relationship with God and with one another, all while acquiring the technical mastery to help transform the world for the benefit of all. Catholic schools give the best of what we have in order to draw out the best in each of our children.

This vision for education is different from the dominant approaches to education in the United States—so different that we have our own schools. Yet even with our own schools, Catholic schools have faced enormous pressure both from within and from without to conform, to change our way of educating in order to fit the priorities of others in a given moment. For example, about one hundred years ago, a state law was passed that required all students to attend public school, effectively forcing all Catholic schools to permanently close their doors. The Compulsory Public

School Attendance Bill was grounded in a whole host of complex philosophical arguments, but at its core was the belief that the state's way of educating in its tradition was the only way to educate well in those times, which seemed truly "unprecedented." Catholic parents and the Sisters of the Holy Name of Jesus and Mary who ran Catholic elementary schools faced a serious challenge to their fundamental way of educating their children. They ultimately challenged the law, arguing from both faith and reason that Catholic education may be different from that provided by the state, but their ability to form loyal, intelligent, and talented Americans was unquestioned. Ultimately, in 1925, the Supreme Court struck down the law, and Catholic schools once again opened their school buildings.

A second example nearer to our time: in July 2019, the Catholic bishops in the state of Minnesota carefully examined the growing influence of gender ideology on K–12 public school policies, which, among other things, allows preschoolers to choose a gender different from their biological sex and prohibits teachers from informing parents of these decisions

unless the child gives permission. Although these policies do not apply to Catholic schools, this problematic approach to human sexuality was influencing curriculum and educational standards, as activists claimed to have found the best way to educate all children in today's world, which again seemed like truly "unprecedented" times.

Our Catholic schools were not immune to these pressures. Committed to educating in faith and right reason, Catholic school leaders prudently applied faith and right reason to this challenge and consulted with experts in education, medicine, law, theology, and science. Prioritizing the protection of the God-given dignity of each child, the document "Guiding Principles for Catholic Schools and Religious Education Concerning Human Sexuality and Sexual Identity" clarifies for Catholic schools our vision for education and is markedly different from the approach of the state. As the "Guiding Principles" articulates, Catholic schools will honor the perennial biblical truth that "God has created each person as a unity of body and soul, as male or female, and that God-designed sexual expression and behavior must be exclusively

oriented to love and life in marriage between one man and one woman.”¹ As it did at the time of the founding of Catholic schools, fidelity to the Catholic educational tradition continues to make our schools look different from other educational options.

As we look more deeply into the challenges that Catholic school leaders regularly encounter, the COVID-19 crisis seems less and less “unprecedented.” When the novelty of COVID-19 posed a significant threat to public health and the good of all, Catholic educators used the same decision-making principles of faith and reason they use to advance the unique mission of Catholic education in the midst of a dominant educational milieu that is not always aligned with that mission. In a way, Catholic school leaders were broadly prepared for COVID-19 and its challenges to the fundamental ways of educating children.

In considering the particular circumstances we faced in March 2020, the Archdiocese of Saint Paul

1. “Guiding Principles for Catholic Schools and Religious Education Concerning Human Sexuality and Sexual Identity,” Minnesota Catholic Conference website, <http://www.mncatholic.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/20.0604-GUIDING-PRINCIPLES-FOR-CATHOLIC-SCHOOLS-AND-RELIGIOUS-EDUCATION-CONCERNING-HUMAN-SEXUALITY-AND-SEXUAL-IDENTITY.pdf>.

and Minneapolis made the prudential decision to encourage all Catholic schools to be ready for a potential shift to distance learning; consequently, all Catholic schools were asked to take two planning days without students in order to prepare. It would be a matter of days before the archdiocese encouraged all its schools to temporarily close their school buildings in order to give public health leaders and the medical community time to prepare healthcare systems, to better understand the impact of the novel virus, and to avert a potentially devastating public health catastrophe. Within days, all Catholic schools in the archdiocese had transitioned to distance learning and continued to make plans for supporting families throughout the weeks and months ahead.

While Catholic schools operate independently of public school districts, Catholic schools joined other K–12 schools in Minnesota to take these extraordinary measures of closing school buildings for the remainder of the academic year. Catholic schools did not look that different from public schools in those early days of the crisis. Yet the principles on which we acted were very different. By summer, these

principles would start to make us look different, as the clear lens of faith and reason allowed us to see that opening elementary schools even in the midst of the COVID-19 uncertainties could likely be done safely and that in-person school would be an essential service to families struggling under the weight of the pandemic.

It was often said during that summer that schools should “follow the science.” Following our tradition, Catholic school leaders worked from the premise that the science of COVID-19 can help inform our decisions, but it will never be able to make prudential moral decisions, like whether it is good to try to open school buildings during the COVID-19 pandemic. The admonition to “follow the science” invariably meant “follow someone’s prudential decision about the science.” We set out to make our own prudential decision about the science, not narrowly considering one data point, but looking with breadth across all relevant areas of science, weighing the risks and benefits across a broad number of considerations.

And so, within our system of Catholic schools, we received multiple expert opinions and looked

at multiple sources of data, including the emerging science of COVID-19 research. Initial findings at the time suggested that 1) children were less likely to have severe disease resulting from a SARS-CoV-2 infection, 2) that children may be less likely to become infected and to spread the infection, and 3) that schools have not played a significant role in COVID-19 transmission. And yet, even with this promising COVID-19 research related to children and school opening, we acknowledged that prudential decisions generally err if they rely only on a single scientific perspective. We also had to look at the science of public health guidance, the mounting scientific evidence of seriously adverse mental health issues and declining academic performance due to school closures, and our first-hand knowledge of the essential nature of education and relationships in the lives of children and families.

We determined the best course of action was to prepare for safe, in-person learning in the fall by building a culture of health and safety to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. With the guidance of the archdiocese and the courageous work and dedication of our Catholic school principals, teachers, and staff,

Catholic schools implemented a series of rigorous health and safety protocols, invested significant funds in hiring additional staff and adapting classrooms, and offered distance learning options for families who felt safer at home. Our priority continued to be the good of children while making significant changes to school policies and operations in order to protect those who were most at risk from COVID-19, primarily long-term care residents and the elderly.

The response to the work of Catholic schools to offer safe in-person learning in the Catholic educational tradition was truly unprecedented. Every grade saw an enrollment increase, with nearly half of our schools starting wait-lists. As the first days of in-person learning turned into the successful first weeks and the successful weeks became the entire fall semester, archdiocesan data and data kept by the Minnesota Department of Health showed little to no transmission of COVID-19 in schools. Even as case rates continued to rise as the second wave of COVID hit the state in late fall, the director of the Center for Disease Control echoed our own thinking when he insisted in November 2020 that schools are one of the

safest places children can be during the pandemic. Our Catholic schools were no exception, as they provided the essential service of in-person learning and pivoted to short-term distance learning if the specific building-level metrics necessitated a shift.

The specific details of the COVID-19 challenge are undoubtedly unprecedented. Because they are so immediately in front of us, they tend to make themselves seen as the most important problems to be solved. Technical and logistical challenges like this usually are, and they require great ingenuity and creativity. In non-COVID times, these challenges look more like “What is the best way to teach phonics?” “What are the best strategies for engaging at-risk families?” However, no matter how important these types of technical challenges are, they are never the most pressing. Catholic school leaders have the perennial challenge of sorting out in every age the essentials of the Catholic educational tradition from the non-essentials, sifting the compatible from the incompatible, analyzing methods and curricula from our lens of faith and reason, and adapting those that help us better prepare children for the world in which they

live, both the visible material world and the invisible spiritual world. It is increasingly becoming a very different way of educating in the United States, yet Catholic schools have always been different. While those differences are not always that apparent, the COVID-19 crisis has provided a moment of reflection that reminds us that our differences are not simply found in our commitment to safe in-person learning, but rather in our commitment to approach education and to educate from the best of our tradition of faith and reason.

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COVID Lessons for the Priesthood

FR. BLAKE BRITTON

Every generation of priests must discern their place in history, the special way Christ is calling them to manifest his ministry amidst the current circumstances and crises of the world. So it has been for me during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Lord uses trying times as an opportunity to form and sanctify those who have eyes to see and ears to hear (see Matt. 13:9–6). These past months, the Holy Spirit has used my various experiences from COVID-19 to lead me in a meditation on the nature of the priesthood. Specifically, I have grown in my appreciation of the sanctifying and prophetic character of priestly ministry. This chapter will be a summary of these lessons on the priesthood from COVID-19 and how they refined my appreciation of this splendid vocation.

Priest-Sanctifier

Before all else, a priest is called to sanctify. This is his premier responsibility and the guiding principle of all his pastoral endeavors. The most perfect means of sanctification is the sacred liturgy, especially the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Knowledge of this fact made the lockdowns difficult for me. How was I to sanctify my flock when I was forbidden to see them, touch them, and feed them? It caused great pain in my priestly heart. This led me to reflect more deeply on the essence of the liturgy and what comprises its effectiveness. I started reading writings from the Church Fathers on Holy Communion and the theology of the Mass. What I discovered was quite inspiring.

The practice of regular reception of Holy Communion by the laity is a relatively recent phenomenon mainly due to the liturgical reforms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Traditionally, the distribution of Holy Communion for the laity was reserved for high feasts or other special liturgies. Yet we know the faithful still attended Mass throughout Church

history regardless of whether or not they received Communion. Why? Because, in the end, the Mass is not primarily for us; *it is for God*. The sacrifice of the Eucharist is first and foremost the offering of Christ to the Father. Thus the ancient Christians always understood the Doxology as the highpoint of the Mass, *not* the moment when we receive Holy Communion. For it is “through *him*, and with *him*, and in *him*” that the Mass is validated and efficacious. Our participation does not constitute the foundation of the liturgy. It is rooted in the activity of Christ.

The priest finds himself at the intersection of this divine liturgical activity as he simultaneously represents Christ to the Father and Christ to the Church. As I stood day after day at the altar of our chapel before a collection of empty pews, there developed in my soul a keen awareness of this reality. I am at this altar for the Father, to glorify him and offer him right worship. Even though my people cannot be physically present, these words of institution and the rubrics are just as potent; they still yield grace, they still save souls. Yet I was also there for my parishioners. Like never before, I felt my flock’s longing for

the Eucharist and the ache of their souls to attend the liturgy. I brought every one of them in my own person to the altar of God. St. Paul's words took on a newfound significance for me: "I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church" (Col. 1:24). The sufferings of the whole world—those afflicted by COVID-19 and its consequences—were represented in my flesh as I stood in the person of Christ before the Father.

Thankfully, our parish is slowly returning to normal as people once again fill the pews and sing hymns. But my way of celebrating the Mass will never be the same. God granted me an enriched appreciation of the gift of his priesthood and the potency of the Eucharistic sacrifice. I pray that we will never lock down our churches again. That being said, I am grateful that God used the time of lockdown to reinforce my devotion to and love of the Eucharist.

Prophet-Teacher

Pope St. John XXIII exhorted the fathers of the Second Vatican Council to “read the signs of the times.”¹ He knew that the twentieth century required priests who could recognize the trends and ideologies that shape culture so as to speak the truth in the modern world. The priesthood of Jesus Christ is not a peripheral or cursory profession. It is essential in the deepest sense of the word. No other vocation is more needed in times of panic, upheaval, and distress than the priesthood. Through the sacraments and preaching, priests anchor the people of God in the reality of Christ’s salvation so they might have the strength to face the day and its trials. As such, priests have to be keen and steadfast, calmly observing the happenings of society without undue influence from media, politics, scientists, or government authorities. Like Elijah, they must see past these numerous and often contradictory voices with a holy obedience to the “still small voice” of the Spirit (1 Kings 19:12

1. “Pope John XXIII Convoles the Second Vatican Council” (English translation of the apostolic constitution *Humanae Salutis*), *In Verbo Veritatis* (blog), December 2011, <https://jakomonchak.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/humanae-salutis.pdf>.

RSV-CE). Only then can they truly feed the sheep and lead them according to the divine will, lest they put their faith in the mandates of the world over and against the hope of God.

Inspired by St. John XXIII, I have been closely observing the world's response to COVID-19. It is quite obvious we are living in a post-Christian era that puts its confidence in government, laws, science, and human reason. Faith is seen as a sentimental institution or a psychological tool, but it does not have anything to offer when actual tragedy or serious situations arise. This is clearly evidenced by the fact that in some states during the phases of reopening, churches remained closed while strip clubs, casinos, and liquor stores opened. The definition of “essential” seemed somewhat skewed. That is because, to the post-Christian mind, religion is purely subjective and personal. It has no bearing on the real world and proffers no real solutions. For months, media outlets and companies became the focus of our hope, time, and resources as we anxiously awaited the development of a COVID-19 vaccine, trusting that it would save us and give us freedom.

All this to say, many voices are bombarding our parishioners, vying for their attention and faith. Where is the Church's voice? Does she sound like everyone else? Is her voice indiscernible from the voices of the world? Or do her policies and teachings pierce through the cacophony of media, scientism, and politics in order to present a faith-filled reflection on current events? Are her priests able to name grace when no one else can? Are we willing to stay focused on Christ and his victory over death when everyone around us is talking of the great power death possesses?

From the beginning of COVID-19, I realized the need to enact my prophetic office as a priest through preaching and lifestyle. As a shepherd, I cannot succumb to a spirit of panic, fear, or anxiety. It is pastorally irresponsible. Likewise, I cannot get bogged down by the political rhetoric that surrounds me and smothers the daily life of my parishioners. My voice needs to be one "crying out in the wilderness" (John 1:23), seeking to make the "Bitter Valley . . . a place of springs" (Ps. 84:6 Grail). Joy and peace in Christ is my rallying cry. We can put our confidence in every

science, technology, and power of this world, but it will ultimately fall short. Nothing can satisfy but Christ and his Church. While it is not wrong to take advice from health professionals, enact our constitutional rights, and aspire to increase our medical expertise, these things should not dictate our lives nor be the source of our hope. For “if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge” (1 Cor. 13:2) but do not trust in God, I have nothing. Something else will inevitably arise to steal my peace and cause me anxiety no matter how many technologies and medicines we invent.

These past months, the people of God have been so appreciative of this message of joy and peace in Christ. They get enough about COVID-19 regulations, political turmoil, and doomsday predictions. Preaching the Gospel free of this world’s narratives helps bring them back to the goodness of reality, which is so often warped by social media and news outlets. In the end, everything will be okay, because Jesus Christ is alive and he loves us. And “who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness,

or peril, or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us” (Rom. 8:35, 37).

I am sure there are many lessons each of us has learned throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Let us learn from our mistakes, be encouraged by our successes, and strive to be better equipped spiritually for the years ahead knowing that as long as Masses are being celebrated and Christians are loving Christ, nothing can take away our peace and joy. For “you, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world” (1 John 4:4 NIV).

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Parishes, Suffering, and the Source of Healing

FR. HARRISON AYRE

I will never forget the moment. It was Thursday, March 12, 2020. I was preparing for Mass when an email from the diocese came through: starting on Friday, we were closing our churches. We had a small group at Mass that day, sitting distanced from one another, pews roped off. After I proclaimed the Gospel, I broke the news that we would be closed. I'll never forget the emotion of that moment. I choked up as I broke this news to my people. Never in my short life as a priest thus far did I ever think I would have to tell my people the church would be closed. It wasn't just an emotional moment for me; it was an emotional moment for the people too: it was a moment of shared suffering and sadness.

To share suffering and sadness with one another, as difficult as it might be, is, in fact, not only a profound

encounter and experience of the Church as the Body of Christ but part of her very mission. The pandemic, as hard as it may be to see, has been a profound grace to draw us back to the heart and meaning of the Church. That moment I spoke of above really is a moment of the Church, lived out concretely in the midst of the life of the parish. Let's explore this idea a little more.

The Church is the Body of Christ: it is the mysterious unity of all the baptized in the person of Christ. When we are baptized, we are made members of Christ's Body, those through whom Christ continues to make himself present to the world. It's for this reason that the Second Vatican Council calls the Church the "universal sacrament of salvation": she is a sacrament, a visible sign that makes present an invisible reality.¹ The Church, then, makes Christ not just present but visible to the world.

Since we are all members of the Body of Christ, it means we all share in Christ's mission, which is nothing other than to save the world from the dominion of sin and death, and to be immersed in Christ,

1. *Lumen Gentium*, 48, in *Word on Fire Vatican II Collection* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Institute, 2021), 112.

in whom we have true life. But the Church, as his Body, means that we, the members, are all intimately connected. It's why Paul says that "if one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together" (1 Cor. 12:26). To be in Christ's Body means that the sufferings we all endure are not just Christ's but all of ours, that our victories and joys are not just our own but belong to all. This means, first and foremost, that to be a Christian is to be ecclesial, to be united to the Church. Yet one thing that is revealed to the Church in this time is how we allowed an individualistic form of piety to invade our spiritual lives. Faith is a gift that comes to us from the Church, and therefore it is given only in union with her in a shared way of life, a shared life of the sacraments, etc. But individualistic piety, whereby I only care about the sacraments for my own good, for my own spiritual care, and based on what I want in terms of access to the liturgy, betrays a lack of ecclesial faith. How and why this happened is much too deep for our reflection here. But what this time reveals to us is a call to rediscover the ecclesial form of faith. This means realizing that sacramental life, while obviously

good for each of us as individuals, is at the service of the good of the whole Body of the Church. It means giving greater importance to and having a greater desire for the common good. It means the parish being seen to be larger than *just* her institutional element. And it means living out suffering for the salvation of our particular parish area.

The Church: uniting us all sacramentally

The sacraments serve the unity of the Church and guarantee that unity. This means our sacramental life should be oriented toward this unity. Our reception of the Eucharist, for example, while providing us with grace, is a gift of grace that is meant to be given away to others in the Church. Just as Christ holds nothing back when he gives himself to us in the Eucharist, so, too, we are to make our lives a gift to others both in the Church and in the world. The words “Do this in memory of me” are also a command to the Church: the Body sacrificed and glorified that we receive in the Eucharist is to be

lived out in us. Our reception of the Eucharist is to lead to not just this imitation of Christ's way but is the gift given us that enables us to participate in Christ's way, which is the way of the cross. Thus, while access to the Eucharist has perhaps been limited to us at this time, it is also an opportunity given us by the Lord to reflect on this great gift: Am I living out in my body what Christ has given me through his? Or am I simply receiving the Eucharist without wanting to give myself away? By living Christ's way in us through this gift, we thereby build up Christ's Body, because we recognize this gift given to us is meant to be food through which we give ourselves away to others.

The common good: a principle of Catholic moral action

This Eucharistic gift, whereby we live for others by its power, begins to reveal a primary objective of the Catholic moral life. Our actions and decisions are to be done for the common good, the good of all. While obviously our moral actions have personal

consequences, we often find ourselves thinking about our moral choices as to how they affect us only on an individual level, but if there's one thing that this year has shown us, it is the need to think of the good of others when making certain decisions. The reason, for example, for Church closures at various points was so that our most vulnerable wouldn't die unnecessarily. This is a good and noble thing that comes from this desire to take everything into consideration. Sometimes, pursuing the common good means that we will have to suffer inconveniences so that those who cannot protect themselves can continue to live, and that happens when the common good is taken into our moral consideration. This is an important thing for us to learn as we move forward. Not only ought we to consider how our choices and actions affect us personally, but we should also consider their broader implications on the lives of others. Living out of the principle of the common good means that my decisions flow out of the ecclesial experience mentioned above, the fact that we are one Body, and that the actions of one member affect the others. This is true not only on the level

of the universal Church but also on the level of the particular parish as well.

The Parish: the local manifestation of the Church

If the sacraments help us live out our Christian mission in the world whereby we seek the common good, then the life of the parish is the place this mission is lived out. And again, while many things were removed from us in terms of the liturgical life, it became an opportunity to discover that the parish is truly the way the Church makes herself present locally. In living our mission for the sake of the common good, the work of the parish occurs when we phone a friend we know is lonely, drop off a meal to a frontline worker who doesn't have time to cook, or find ways to do outreach and ministry on our own. The pandemic became a real opportunity for us to discover our own responsibility in the life of the parish, and to recognize that this responsibility extends beyond the institutional aspect of the parish. The latter is vital for gathering us together and in that gathering to be sent on mission

to bring Christ to the world. If we felt “the parish” didn’t do enough during the shutdowns, perhaps that is a challenge to us to inspire us to action and to live out the Gospel. Not everything has to go through your pastor! It is vital we realize our responsibility in building up the Church by going out on mission.

Without the involvement of everyone, a parish can never thrive. It is imperative for parishes, then, in order to live out the ecclesial faith, to take initiative in this time and create opportunities for outreach and bringing people to the Lord. Examples are as many as we are inventive: hosting a weekly dinner where we invite someone we don’t know from the parish to our home, hosting small groups that want to do a book study, seeking out the poor and bringing them meals or inviting them out for a coffee. These are some small and simple examples, but regardless, everything we do in the name of the Lord is a work of the parish. The moment we can start realizing this, it can inspire us in our mission and help us realize that we must live out the mission of the Church locally.

The salvific character of suffering

As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, suffering is something that we all do together. We are not in this alone, because the Lord, through our Baptism, guarantees that we are all in this together. Again, just as one suffers, all suffer. What we experience is never alone, but it's always together as a communion in the Church. The mission of this Church is the salvation of the world, and one of the most powerful ways we can aid Jesus in this mission is to enter into his suffering.

It is here that the parish can thrive and live. When we suffer, we are living out Christ's mission locally, for those in our parish boundaries. Jesus suffered not so that he could take away suffering, at least not until the resurrection of the body at the end of time, but rather so that he can transform suffering into something salvific.

This is the mission of the parish: to be united to the cross of Christ so that our local area can be sanctified and saved through his cross. This is how the Church is the universal sacrament of salvation: by doing this work locally, through particular parishes, to bring

what saves to those in need—the cross of Christ. And the local parish does this by suffering and sharing in this cross.

This is particularly illuminated by St. Teresa of Kolkata. Her charism and the charism of her order is charity, and charity is to give oneself away so that another may live. St. Teresa lived this by suffering a deep darkness—experienced as the felt absence of God—for almost the entire time she was a Missionary of Charity. She endured this suffering for those whom she served, knowing that she was participating in their darkness and taking it on herself so that they might see the light of Christ. This profound spiritual work continues to this day with the Missionaries of Charity and their Suffering Co-Workers who offer their sufferings for the mission of the order in service to the poor.

The Church, and more particularly our parishes, would do well to learn from St. Teresa. The felt suffering we have endured this year is real and deep. But it is also salvific. We can embrace it, enter into it, and unite it to the Lord so that we may be missionaries of charity in our local parishes, seeking the

good of others through the grace given to us in the sacramental life of the Church. This is the healing balm offered to us right now from Christ; it is what the Lord is teaching the Church.

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Quenching God's Thirst for Charity and Justice

FR. JOSH JOHNSON

"See, I am doing something new!"

—ISAIAH 43:19

When you turn onto Highway 429 in South Louisiana, you quickly notice a change of pace as you enter the bayou town of St. Amant. A large wooden church, introduced by a century-old cemetery and rickety-looking bridge brings you to the front of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary Catholic Church, where, since 1905, generations of disciples have come together for worship at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and for prayer, study, fellowship, and service to the poor.

In August 2016, the St. Amant community was the subject of national headlines when catastrophic floods devastated this rural community. Thirteen lives

were lost and thousands (85 percent of parishioners) were displaced because their homes were destroyed.

I was assigned to Our Lady of the Holy Rosary one year after what became known as the “Great Flood of 2016.” As parishioners began to move back into their homes, I discerned that our Lord was inviting me to meet with them, listen to their stories, and bless their homes.

Meeting with family after family, I repeatedly sensed twin themes: gratitude and a desire to give back. Donations had poured in from across the country. Celebrities such as Beyoncé, Ellen DeGeneres, Lady Gaga, and Taylor Swift made substantial donations to rebuilding the area. Many of my parishioners shared with me a desire to give back to the community since they had received so much.

Immediately following the flood, the parish food pantry, located at the back of our campus, remained accessible. While quite helpful to the community following the disaster, as parish life returned to some semblance of normalcy, our team decided to move the food pantry to the front of our campus, where it better reflected Gospel values and the Church’s

preferential option for the poor, a key principle of Catholic social teaching.

Our old, vacant rectory, adjacent to the church and facing Highway 429, captured my imagination. I began to share with my team and parishioners my desire to move the food pantry to this location. This vision sparked our parishioners to reflect on their own blessings as well as their desires to share with the larger community in need. Together with my team, we listened to the dreams of our parishioners and took them to Jesus in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament.

Through communal discernment, we renamed the old building “The Full of Grace Café: Quenching God’s Thirst for Charity and Justice.” Along with making space for our food pantry, we redesigned the building to also include a coffee shop, a diaper bank, and a free hair salon and barbershop. Another disciple on our team, who was a certified Creighton Fertility Care specialist, shared her dream of setting up a clinic to work with couples struggling with infertility and for teaching women how to chart their cycles when practicing natural family planning (NFP). We also provided space for small-group Bible studies, a

counseling center, showers for the homeless, and a laundromat.

Directly over the entrance of the café hang three images of the Blessed Mother: Our Lady of Guadalupe from North America, Our Lady of Kibeho from Africa, and Our Lady of the Holy Rosary from Europe. The intentional theme of diversity can be seen vividly throughout the café in the portraits of saints hanging on the walls of various outreach rooms. Each saint's portrait, paired with a verse from Scripture, was chosen for the specific intention of connecting those serving and those being served with the charisms and apostolates of that particular saint. For example, in the hair salon hangs a striking portrait of Mary Magdalene with a Scripture quote on the adjacent wall, which reads, "I give thanks for I am fearfully, wonderfully made" (Ps. 139:14). In the counseling center hangs a portrait of St. Dymphna, the patron saint of mental illness and anxiety. Adjacent to her portrait hangs a quote from Isaiah: "Share your food with the hungry, provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, clothe them, and do not turn away from your own flesh and blood. . . . Then

your light will break forth like the dawn, and your wound will be quickly healed” (Isa. 58:7–8). Our parish mission is to form saints, and I want everyone to know that sainthood is possible.

Upon completion of the renovation of the old rectory, Bishop Michael Duca blessed the Full of Grace Café on the First Sunday of Advent in 2018. The café “opened for business” on January 2, 2019. Since then, hundreds of people have passed through the doors weekly, whether for a hot dinner on Tuesday nights, lunch on Thursdays, or to attend one of the many small-group Bible studies taking place throughout the week. Upon hearing about the café, the Internal Revenue Service, the Veterans Administration, the St. Vincent de Paul Pharmacy, and Medicare and Medicaid specialists—to name just a few—approached us about making their services available to the community in our facility. Since then, workdays have been set aside for members in need to meet with various specialists. Outside of Mass, on any ordinary day of the week, the café has been the “hub” of the parish, with visitors and volunteers coming in and going out morning until night.

In 2020, our parish, like the rest of the world, received a mandate to shut down because of the global coronavirus pandemic. In the midst of this catastrophic shutdown, many of my parishioners lost loved ones and jobs. In the midst of the ongoing suffering our people are experiencing, they are still committed to the mission of Jesus Christ to make disciples of all nations.

As soon as our local government entered phase 1 of the reopening plan, our team of disciples at Holy Rosary came together to pray and discern how we could best serve the people who lived in the geographical boundaries of our community.

One of the first ideas that we discerned through our communal team prayer was to connect with each family who is registered in our parish—all 2,500 of them! Our paid staff and a number of our faithful volunteers committed to calling our newly home-bound parishioners. We prayed with them over the phone; listened to their stories, thoughts, feelings, and desires; and invited them to get plugged into online small-group Bible studies via Zoom. Many people in our community returned to the sacraments after

being away from the Church for many years because of their participation in the online Bible studies.

We also transitioned our religious education program for the youth in our parish into an online family faith formation program that was geared toward making disciples of the entire family and not just the children. Our team produced short YouTube videos focusing on the upcoming Sunday readings, catechesis on the different parts of the Mass, and stories about the lives of the saints who were rooted in worship of God at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. We also equipped these families with tools to pray together throughout the week and fun activities to study the teachings of the Apostles.

It's been wonderful to see many and varied members of the community coming together to help one another in need. It's the work of the entire parish, the Body of Christ. My parishioners do so much more than I do.

Welcoming and encouraging each member of the community to be part of the Full of Grace Café team, participate in our religious education programs, or assist with multimedia needs has been the mission

since the beginning. I want to encourage leaders in our parish to open our doors and invite every member of the geographical boundaries of our parish community to sit at the table with us. We need to meet people where they are and invite them to walk and pray with us. Supernatural fruit must be preceded by listening to one another so that we can see what each disciple has to offer. I have seen conversions take place all because people have felt invited to sit with us and be part of our team. We invite those who are coming to the food pantry to pray with us or to just hang out and have coffee or lunch with us. I have witnessed someone coming in for a meal only to see them come back the following week to serve others. It's a huge gift!

The café fulfills a need for community that many Catholics are recognizing as missing in their faith life. We all ache for fellowship. We often find ourselves less than satisfied in this regard. Instead, we experience the universal phenomenon and longing for connection and community, not always nor easily found in families, churches, or workplaces.

The Catholic Church sometimes struggles to

create places for community. The café and small-group Bible studies are concrete responses to that longing. We all need accountability and encouragement in our relationship with God. Because of these ministries, connections are being made—both with Jesus in the sacraments and among the members of the Body of Christ in friendship.

In addition to our work in the café, we began live-streaming daily and weekly Mass through the Ascension Press Facebook page. With an international audience, we experienced an increase in donations, which allowed us to renovate some existing properties into an Adoration chapel and retreat center.

In December 2020, the parish blessed and opened a new Adoration chapel next to the Full of Grace Café. This chapel for Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament is the place where we will be filled up to continue the work our Lord has invited us to do for the formation of saints in our community.

January 2021 brought the opening of the Holy Rosary Retreat Center, where guests are invited to spend time on silent retreats to find renewal in Christ. Our personal, individually directed retreats cater

to one's spiritual needs through one-on-one daily meetings with a spiritual director, daily Mass in our historical wooden church, and time set apart for Adoration in our Blessed Sacrament chapel. Retreatants are encouraged to end their stay in our Full of Grace Café by serving the poor of our community with our local volunteers.

As the capacity of the Full of Grace Café expands and the imaginations of our staff and ministry teams continue to be discerned, ongoing spiritual support will be needed to continue building God's kingdom in the St. Amant community. I hope and pray more disciples of Jesus Christ from around the world will intercede for us through prayer and fasting. My desire is that other parishes will see the supernatural fruits this community-driven effort is producing and will build similar ministries, where all members of the community feel a sense of value and belonging in a place where they can share their God-given gifts and talents.

I truly believe that if we can do this work for the kingdom of God, anyone can!

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Spiritual Accompaniment during COVID

JULIANNE STANZ

*God is opening before the Church the horizons of a
humanity more fully
prepared for the sowing of the Gospel.¹*

—ST. JOHN PAUL II

2020 was a defining year for many of us. A global pandemic was racing across the world and phrases such as “social distancing” and “cocooning” became part and parcel of everyday conversation. Virtual schooling became widespread, businesses were characterized as “essential” or “nonessential,” and working from home became routine practice. In just a short time, the way we lived, where we prayed, how we grieved, and how we celebrated all changed. So much of

1. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 3, encyclical letter, Vatican website, December 7, 1990, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html.

life has shifted in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. For some, this time brought rest and healing; for others, it brought sadness and anxiety. For all of us, it ushered in a season of change, including for our parishes.

As creatures of habit, we naturally long for routine, and so we try to find our equilibrium during times of tension and stress. The tension is that we are still undergoing this turbulent period of limbo in the history of the Catholic Church when the full effects of what we have been through are not always obvious. In Ireland, where I grew up, we would call this a “betwixt and between time”—a time that straddles the “now and the not yet.” We intuit that life has changed, but we do not yet know how drastically. The same is true for Catholic parishes across the United States. We know that this time has changed how we mobilize for mission, how we support people in their life of faith, and how we accompany those who are most vulnerable in our midst. What we do not know is the long-term effects of the pandemic upon us as a society—including the Catholic Church.

While our story as a Catholic people is still being written, this time has ushered in a new way of being

for many parishes. It gave most of us a chance to slow down, to spend more time in our homes rather than our cars—an opportunity for introspection and contemplation. For Catholics, it grieved our hearts to see many of our churches close, quite a few for the first time in their history. The absence of the Eucharist led us to contemplate more deeply an understanding of the act of spiritual communion. When parishes began to open again, we heard many stories from parish teams who witnessed tears when their parishioners were able to physically receive the Eucharist after many months of Eucharistic drought. We also witnessed heroic acts of great bravery and courage carried out in parishes that found ways to provide spiritual nourishment and convey a sense of hope to their communities through missionary outreach and creativity. Many parishes offered their faith formation classes, Bible studies, and Masses as virtual events while also coordinating food drives and other outreach efforts.

But there are also stories of other parishes that did very little outside of live-streaming Mass and sending out an occasional update through a bulletin

or newsletter. “Some did a little; some did a lot” was the way that one parish staff member summed up this time in conversation recently.

Having worked in parishes for many years and now serving at the diocesan level, I have had a bird’s eye view of how parishes responded and are continuing to respond to the pandemic. Every week since March 2020, a small task force of eight people coordinates what we call “Parish Life Line” conversations with the 156 parishes whom we serve in the Diocese of Green Bay. The Parish Life Line is a virtual event that brings together parish leaders to gather in prayer, to network, and to discuss creative strategies and ways to form disciples. Our main focus as the “Spiritual Accompaniment Task Force” is supporting and guiding our parishes in accompanying their people—both spiritually and practically. In this chapter, I will provide a summary of some practical and spiritual wisdom from these parishes to encourage you in your missionary efforts to evangelize and form disciples.

The great pause for prayer

During a recent conversation with a group of parishes, one of the pastors referred to 2020 as “the great pause.” It was the first time that I had heard this expression, and it certainly gave me pause to consider what this time holds for us beyond a narrow focus on the disease. What does this time mean for us spiritually? What does this time mean for parishes struggling with diminishing resources, personnel, and Mass attendance? What does it mean for us collectively as a society regarding what we value and how we live? How can we best accompany our people during this time?

One surprising statistic early in the pandemic centered on how people were responding to this crisis. In March 2020, research from Jeanet Sinding Bentzen, Executive Director of the Association for the Study of Religion, Economics, and Culture, emphasized that the pandemic was intensifying a new search for prayer. Using Google Trends analysis on internet searches for “prayer” for seventy-five countries, Bentzen found that the search intensity for “prayer” doubled for every

80,000 new registered cases of COVID-19 in an area. This research should lead our parishes to reconsider their mission as a center of prayer for all people—not just Catholics—and a vital part of their evangelization and outreach efforts intrinsic to forming disciples. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus regularly retreats from the world to spend time alone in prayer. Prayer is at the heart of the disciple-making process. In ministry, we run the risk of spending our days talking about Jesus but not talking *to* him. Jesus’ example shows us that taking every discipleship decision to the Father is the best first step. Prayer should be at the center of and permeate the entire discipleship process. In *Navigating the New Evangelization*, Fr. Cantalamessa reminds us that “prayer is essential for Evangelization because Christian preaching is not primarily the communication of a doctrine but of a way of being. The one who prays without speaking does more evangelization than the one who speaks without praying.”² The value of stillness and solitude in prayer are gifts that our parishes do not often highlight for parishioners or those who are searching for a deeper sense of

2. Raniero Cantalamessa, OFM Cap., *Navigating the New Evangelization* (Boston: Pauline Books, 2014), 25.

peace in their lives. Those parishes who found creative ways to carry out Eucharistic Adoration, for example, reported that people expressed their appreciation to be in the presence of our Lord, even if Adoration was carried out in unusual circumstances. Offering basic, intermediate, and advanced classes centered on learning how to pray, evenings of reflection, and sending home family prayer packets should continue to be a regular part of how we reach out.

A time to clarify our mission and values

20/20 is considered to be the gold-standard when it comes to vision. When an eye doctor tests for 20/20 vision, what is being measured is visual acuity, which is the clarity and sharpness of your vision of objects from twenty feet away. Physically, many of us don't have 20/20 vision, and spiritually speaking, none of us have perfect 20/20 vision. But what if our parishes considered 2020 as the time that clarified their vision so that they could better focus on their mission? Many parishes took the opportunity to do just that.

In the early stages of the pandemic, many parishes began to prayerfully reconsider their mission and vision in light of the pandemic and considered anew their mission to evangelize people to transform the world. They began to evaluate why their faith formation efforts largely ran on a September–May framework that takes place for one hour a week in the classroom. They began to take seriously the charge to form missionary disciples even when they could not physically gather in person, learning that discipleship truly is a way of life and not bound by the constraints of time or by our programs or processes.

This was a time where many parishes naturally engaged three questions regarding how best to move forward: What do we need to stop doing to form disciples? What do we need to keep doing to form disciples? What do we need to start doing to form disciples? This led to greater clarity of purpose and a way to refocus on their people. Other parishes used this time to provide professional development opportunities to their parish teams through virtual formation or by reading spiritual classics together. An observation from a deacon at one urban parish indicated how the move to

virtual connections brought mixed blessings. Deacon Larry commented: “When I worked at the parish offices, I would gather with the pastor and the parish team pretty irregularly but pretty easily. If something was going on, our pastor often called us together to pray or share news. Sometimes a week or two would pass before the whole team got together. However, as we moved to remote ministry, it took much more intentionality to help the parish team stay connected. One of the ways that we did this was through scheduling a Zoom Angelus with the team every day.”

People, not programs

Our parishes are a part of the Body of Christ, but they are also complex systems, communities within communities that work together. But, essentially, they are composed of people. It is our people who will renew our parishes, not programs, slick marketing, or great resources. Those factors are peripheral to the core work of renewing our parishes by renewing our people, beginning with our own disposition and witness, for we are all called to holiness.

Our parish teams know certain facets of parish life; they have close contact with some parishioners—often the ones who are the most active in ministries—and pay less attention to those they do not know as well. During COVID-19, many parishes began to evaluate how to reach their parishioners in the absence of being able to conduct their regular programming. During the pandemic, many parishes established calling-trees to reconnect with their parishioners and to offer support and pray with people, especially those who were homebound, isolated, or alone. As parishes naturally considered what they could and could not do, particularly in light of the challenges of increased sanitization efforts and changing health guidelines, many began to look at their parish programs in a different light.

This included their RCIA programs. Parish teams found that, with the pause in programming, fundraising, and other event-driven ministries, they had more time to get to know their people, especially their catechumens and newly baptized and confirmed Catholics. This led them naturally to evaluate their approach to mystagogy. The Greek word *mystagogy*

is roughly translated as “learning about or interpreting the mysteries.” Mystagogy is the fourth stage of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults and extends throughout the Easter season until the Feast of Pentecost and beyond. This ongoing formation, which takes place over a lifetime, is an ever-deeper initiation into God’s self-revelation. It is a process of growing in the faith through prayer, learning, and practicing with other believers. In the section of the encyclical *Sacramentum Caritatis* titled “Mystagogical Catechesis,” Pope Benedict XVI reminds us that mystagogy centers “on a vital and convincing encounter with Christ, as proclaimed by authentic witnesses. It is first and foremost the witness who introduces others to the mysteries.”³ Without the busyness of meetings, emails, and events, some parish teams used the pandemic to work toward a culture of mystagogy at their parish, harnessing virtual technologies that helped them to connect more fluidly with people while being more intentional about their approach to lifelong faith formation.

3. Pope Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 64, apostolic exhortation, Vatican website, February 22, 2007, http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20070222_sacramentum-caritatis.html.

Modeling missionary creativity and flexibility

We can no longer have a “business as usual” mentality when it comes to parish life, especially as we look to a post-pandemic Church. Among the most dangerous words in any organization are these seven: *We have always done it that way*. If we think we can continue to invite, welcome, and form people today the same way we have for the last half-century, then we are in for a rude awakening. With new generations coming of age and entering adulthood, we are seeing more clearly how our approach to parish life needs to change, particularly as the pace of decline has been accelerated exponentially by the pandemic.

The good news, however, is that many parishes saw the buds of new life emerge as they accompanied their parishioners and all those within their mission field throughout the pandemic. Many parishes balanced prudence with a sense of “holy boldness” and a desire to respond to and alleviate the suffering of those in their midst. They abandoned predetermined programs in favor of focusing on people and

marshaled resources to respond to those in their community. They modeled creativity, adaptability, and resiliency and no longer waited for long, drawn-out processes where everything had to be decided by a committee. In short, they were flexible. Pope Francis reminds us “that the parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community.”⁴ Throughout the pandemic, we witnessed the ability of our parishes to respond nimbly even when under immense pressure, and this is no mean feat.

Aviate, navigate, and communicate

At the same time, many parishes found themselves in a state of stress during the pandemic, which leads to my last point: How do we continue to move forward under times of immense stress? In this regard,

4. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 28, apostolic exhortation, Vatican website, November 24, 2013, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

some lessons from the field of aviation can serve to inspire us.

From the earliest days of flight training, pilots are taught an important set of priorities that should follow them through their entire flying career: *aviate, navigate, and communicate*. The top priority—always—is to *aviate*. That means to fly the airplane by using the flight controls and flight instruments to direct the airplane's attitude, altitude, and airspeed. Rounding out those top priorities are figuring out where you are and where you're going (*navigate*) and, as appropriate, talking to air traffic control or someone outside the airplane (*communicate*). For parishes, no matter what state of pressure or stress they find themselves in, we need to remember these three important principles for our ministers. We need to *aviate* and keep on going, never losing hope or giving in to despair. We must *navigate*, keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus Christ and his Church, focused on the mission of forming disciples. We must also *communicate*, communicate, communicate by continuing to share the Good News of the Gospel, which is needed more now than ever.

Conclusion

The popular expression “hindsight is 20/20” reminds us that it is much easier to look back into the past and think about what we should have done. What is obvious to us at a later date is not always obvious to us in the moment. When we look back, we seem to do so with a wiser, more mature perspective. But it is from the present moment that the future is built. Indeed, the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard noted that “life must be understood backwards . . . [but] it must be lived forwards.”⁵ It is from today, the present moment, that history books are written.

When people look back at this time in the history of the world, what will they say about how we lived? What will they see in us, the Catholic Church? Will they see how we took care of the sick, the dying, and the vulnerable? Will they see how we focused our vision on God and what he wants for our lives?

The word “unprecedented” means something that has never happened or been known before. But while many of us have never experienced a time quite

5. Søren Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals: A Selection*, trans. Alastair Hannay (New York: Penguin Classics, 1996), 161.

like this, the Catholic Church has certainly weathered stranger and more unusual times. Yes, these are unprecedented times, but we are strong enough to get through them. Through two thousand years of history, the Catholic Church has survived times of persecution and pestilence. She has survived the collapse of the Roman Empire, the Bubonic Plague, various famines, the two world wars, various civil wars, and the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918. She will survive the COVID-19 pandemic.

Let's keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, and let's be the Church we are called to be: alive, dynamic, prayerful, courageous, faithful, and bold.

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Community and COVID

MARCEL LEJEUNE

God saved us by becoming one of us. This truth is sometimes glossed over by many Catholics or merely held as a nice truism. Yet it is one of the most foundational and important doctrines of Christianity. God became human. God took on our nature, and, through it, he rescued us. Yet the Incarnation did not change God, even as it changed everything else—including us. In a time of pandemic, isolation, social upheaval, economic strain, and uncertainty, the Incarnation can bring us back to one of the most important things Jesus has revealed: that God will do everything he can to get us to heaven, including becoming one of us, suffering for us, and dying for us. The Incarnation still has the power to produce change, including in the midst of this pandemic. We should expect that COVID-19 will transform our parishes more than anything else has in our lifetime. If we can adapt,

something good might end up being drawn out of it for both the Church and the world.

Jesus as master of evangelization

Recently, several young couples I know got married. They had difficult decisions to make about the number of people to invite, whether to have a reception, and how to keep people safe while trying to celebrate a joyful moment in their lives. In situations like these, we see the need that God has put in us. We are made to be in communion with one another. We are made for relationships. We need one another. We need family, friends, our parishes, and many others. God made us with this need for others. If there is one thing the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the surface of our culture, it is the lack of real community and relationship that many are suffering through. This happens not only outside the Catholic Church but in our parishes, apostolates, and Catholic communities as well. But that isn't the end of the story. God is always up to something, isn't he?

“The Word was made flesh and video called with

us” doesn’t sound right, and it shouldn’t. Jesus is the model of all we are supposed to do and be, and he showed us that there is a physical dimension to ministering to one another that cannot be replaced. Thus, virtual relationships cannot replace true incarnational relationships. The sacraments cannot be given without our being present. Real relationships are formed face-to-face. Our experiences show this incarnational truth lived out when we miss being with friends, family, and our fellow parishioners, and when we long for the sacraments because we are unable to receive them. Jesus reminds us of this need for relationships when we look to Sacred Scripture and reflect upon his life. In the Gospels, we find that the manner in which Jesus lived, served, loved, healed, talked, etc., may not be reflected in some of the ways we are living today, especially in the midst of this pandemic. Our discipleship needs a reboot because Catholics are prone to doing what we are familiar and comfortable with.

In the life of Jesus, he spent the majority of his three years of active ministry with twelve men. He taught them how to live as Christians. He invested his time in them. He challenged them. This model of

evangelization and formation of disciples is inefficient by our modern standards. We aim for large groups and big numbers. Everything is numbered today. But Jesus cared more about names than numbers. COVID-19 is an opportunity to return to prioritizing names over numbers. Diving deep with a few rather than staying shallow with many is the way Jesus really did the work of evangelization. Jesus' methodology of ministry was a part of the revelation of the Father's love for us. Why do we think we can improve upon it by doing something vastly different? Rather, we need to apply what he has taught us to do in our particular time and place. We need to allow room for the Master to show us what our parishes, relationships, families, and work need to look like.

Applying the Incarnation

While in college, my wife and I were formed in a great Catholic community through the Catholic campus ministry we participated in. We both experienced God's love for us through the other people in the parish in a profound and real way. When my wife and I

got married after graduation and moved, we joined a new parish. At this point, we struggled to make friends and form a community among others. We were the young zealots that the older parishioners didn't know what to do with. Few welcomed us into the parish. Nobody intentionally reached out to us. Other young couples ignored us. After a year of waiting for others to lead, we decided to take the initiative ourselves.

We reached out to other young couples and started to build relationships. This was the point when we started to form new friendships and learn how to live in the wider parish community. We didn't necessarily like all the other couples in the group. In fact, we struggled not only to get along with some of our fellow parishioners but with our pastor as well. At the same time, we grew as disciples by being challenged to live out our faith in an authentic way. This is what incarnating the love of God will look like: Catholic disciples who may not have it all figured out but desire to be holy and share the love of Jesus with others. In these moments of working out such a vision in our own lives, we started to learn about what a real Catholic community is and just how messy it can be.

At this point, I am supposed to tell you all the hints and tricks that make an amazing Catholic community where we all love one another. But that isn't what happened and not even what community is supposed to look like. In fact, we need to stop looking for utopia—which doesn't exist—and embrace the messy necessity of doing the hard work that is needed in order to form an authentic Catholic union of disciples. A place where we share life together, including the rough parts.

In a time of COVID-19 restrictions, which may limit how we gather in person, this kind of community is even more difficult, but it's not impossible. We still need one another, and the longing for community that you may feel is probably even stronger in those who may be isolated even more. Those who do not know God's love. Those who have no family or friends. Those who feel unloved.

This gets us right back to the mission of the Church—to help others get to heaven. The mission of the Church cannot wait for better times, because the Gospel is needed in season and out of season (see 2 Tim. 4:2). While it is hard to plan for a future that

is unsure (amidst a crisis we didn't ask for), it may yet be good for us. Good for us, because God is still God. God is still in control. God still has a plan and cares for us.

God is capable of bringing good out of this crisis. God is good and wants to make you and me saints and then get us (and others) to heaven. Sometimes it takes a crisis to help us get our priorities straight and our attention back on what is truly important. Sometimes God uses a crisis to wake up the Church from her slumber. Sometimes our own comfort, apathy, and habits can be distractions that keep us from focusing on the most important things. Thus, I believe God is waking the sleeping portions of his Church by shaking us up and redirecting our gaze back to him, the Church, and a world that desperately needs the Gospel.

I believe God is active and working hard to make us saints. He wants us to be holy. He wants the Church to make disciples. If it takes allowing a crisis to accomplish these things, God will do it—if we allow him to.

Problem or opportunity?

The COVID-19 pandemic is an opportunity more than it is a problem if we are able to see through God's eyes for a moment. The human eyes of Jesus, which saw every human being in front of him as valuable and beautiful when he was on earth, now see us from heaven—more clearly than you or I ever could. What he sees is a better Church at the end of this, one that has reprioritized his love and mission.

Being able to capture such a vision must start with humility and prayer. We can then really discern what each of us needs in order to grow as disciples. Of course, we cannot do this without grace. God wants renewal in our hearts and our Church so we can better fulfill his mission, but he waits on us to give our *fiat* to his request. So what are we waiting for?

The Catholic Church does not exist for itself. It does not exist just to maintain its institutions (parishes, dioceses, schools, hospitals, etc). It does not exist just for those who go to Mass. In fact, the Catholic Church exists in order to bring the entire world to conversion

to Jesus Christ. This pandemic is a great opportunity for us to be reminded of this fact.

But before we go out to the world, we need to make sure we have a stable foundation, built on authentic discipleship relationships. What do these look like? A big mess of sinners, with Jesus in the middle.

But that isn't the end of the story. We shouldn't just settle for dysfunction or sin.

Authentic discipleship relationships

Catholic discipleship relationships are not about always agreeing with or getting along with others. It isn't about always being friends. It is about loving and caring for one another, even those that don't like you (and/or those you don't like).

This is what the community of the early Church looked like. They spent time together—in fact, they spent a lot of time together. We may not be able to spend as much time together, but without time there is no community. Look at how believers gathered together in Acts 2. Read the epistles of Paul and

imagine spending that much time with other people you go to Mass with and yet wouldn't dream of being friends with. Paul and his companions argued and yet still served together. Sometimes they parted ways. But they still supported the mission of the Church. They lived in a community where they met regularly, prayed together, served side by side, held one another accountable, and knew one another. While COVID-19 may have put a damper on doing this with large numbers of people, it doesn't mean we can't still live out true relationships with other followers of Jesus.

Still, the community of the early Church doesn't generally look like many of our parishes currently do. First of all, an authentic Catholic community isn't a bubble. It is supposed to reach out to others. It is supposed to draw others to the sacraments. It is supposed to be for the good of the world, not just the good of those going to Mass. It also needs more intentional building of trust, so we can be accountable to one another. With all this spilled ink about community, this might shock many—but community is NOT the goal.

Jesus is the goal.

Heaven is the goal.

Holiness is the goal.

But we can't fully achieve these goals without authentic discipleship relationships, because Christianity isn't a game of Lone Ranger. When we focus our lives on Jesus, heaven, and holiness (and find others who are doing the same), community can follow. Notice, it doesn't necessarily happen—there still has to be initiative and intention in forming these relationships. But it becomes possible; the table is set for it to happen.

This is why we have so little community in Catholic circles today. We focus on “fellowship,” “community,” “relationships,” “small groups,” etc. We have events and programs, but little investment. Even less do we have intention and initiative in relationships. We then miss out on a real community (because we have probably never really experienced what it is supposed to look like) *and* we focus on something less than what our real goal ought to be—communion with Jesus, alongside one another.

We are not complete without others. We need one

another. We are part of the Church, which Paul calls the “Body of Christ.”

The shifting tide

It happens to everyone. Like being caught in a tide you didn’t feel until you notice that you are far away from the shore, our spiritual lives, friendships, prayer, virtuous living, habits, etc., can all drift on us. Think of the changes you see in others when you go to a reunion. While the spouses of others may not see the changes the same way (because they see that person every day), we certainly will. We may not even realize that a radical change has happened for a long time.

This drifting has happened in our culture as well. We are drifting further and further away from the Christian understanding of community, holiness, sexuality, charity, morality, etc. Furthermore, our parishes and Catholic groups are not immune from this drifting. We see our parishes and organizations drifting along in the cultural current, and it sometimes takes a prophetic voice to show us that the way we are living isn’t what God wants for us.

Our own desires, feelings, thoughts, and comfort are sometimes substituted for Catholic teaching, holiness, and mission. If it makes us too uncomfortable, we shun it. I am certainly not immune from such things. So what does authentic Catholic community look like? It is a difficult mess, wrapped up in grace. It is like a family.

Family

Developing a family-like community in our parishes isn't easy—it takes a lot of hard work. It requires folks who are invested for the long haul (think decades) and ready to invest in one another. It requires people who aren't going to parish hop when things get bad, just like you don't leave the house because of a few arguments. (N.B. There are, of course, valid reasons for changing a parish that I am not addressing here.) It requires people who are going to reach out and take initiative to serve others. It requires people who are willing to invest deeply in a handful of others and then influence more.

Still, community is not friendship, and friendship

is not community. There is an interplay between the two, but they are not the same thing. Community is wider; friendships are smaller. While you ought to form friendships within a community, not everyone in the community needs to be your friend. This lifts some of the burden off of us. While we are called to love and serve all in the community, we don't have to be super close to everyone. Now we can see that community is not just about me and my friends. It is about "we." We need one another. We need the person that annoys us. We need the difficult people.

It is similar to siblings who have to grow up in the same house—and it is good for them to do so. We need others that challenge us. We need to be pushed to love those who are hard to love. This is why we need a community that is larger than just friends.

Just as you can't be a disciple of Jesus when you live a life apart from him, you can't be a part of Christian community and live apart from others (or Jesus). We need to have a sense of the bigger picture. Part of what parishes need to do is try to foster authentic community and not just events and programs. These things can help lay the groundwork for community,

but without intentional leadership that has a vision for the long haul, genuine community probably won't happen.

We don't need novelty. We need authenticity.

Catholics understand the need for others. We rely on the saints and leaders of our Church to help us understand prayer, theology, Scripture, the sacraments, etc. In the same way, we need to mine the depths of the great Catholics who have come before us in terms of community. How did they live, serve, and pray together?

Let us pray that we can truly grow in community. Not a false veneer of it but a community where we can learn to be saints, together. Where we can love Jesus, be challenged to grow, pray together, live side by side, and serve one another. This is community. It is messy and necessary. COVID-19 is merely the next opportunity that God is giving us to come back to home base or start once again.

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to share his greatest passion—helping others come to know the love of Jesus and how to share that love with others. Marcel is married to Kristy, and they have five children.

COVID and the Consolation of Books

MATTHEW NELSON

In his 1959 book, *The Landmarks of Tomorrow*, business management guru Peter Drucker predicted a new world. He predicted that humanity would soon find itself living in what he called a “knowledge society.” In the coming era he foresaw, brains would become more valuable to society than brawn. Drucker was right. In the decades that followed, the world saw the rise of the internet, the development of the personal computer, and the emergence of companies like Apple and Microsoft. Today, we find ourselves submerged in an era not merely of digital technology but of smart technology. And ironically, we find in our so-called knowledge society a decline in the reading of books.

Along with the rise of a knowledge society, wrote Drucker, would come the rise of the “knowledge worker.” Drucker defined such workers as formally

trained, high-level workers who apply theoretical and analytical knowledge for the sake of developing products and services. Such workers include professionals such as doctors, financial analysts, scientists, and lawyers, and could easily be extended to include people like college professors, teachers, writers, artists, and even students.

I've been a knowledge worker most of my adult life. Listening to lectures; reading books and articles; and writing, creating, and testing ideas have all been staples of my life since I was young. I attended university right out of high school, after which I worked as a high school teacher and an investment consultant. I went on to chiropractic school where I studied day and night, conducted research, and eventually worked as a clinical intern. Finally, I moved on to private practice for several years before joining the mission of Word on Fire full-time.

At the Word on Fire Institute, my vocation as a knowledge worker continues. But even though things like reading and writing are things I *must* do, they are also things I *want* to do. They are the sort of activities I would be doing even if I didn't *have* to. For me,

knowledge work is—or at least can be, and sometimes ought to be—leisure. This has especially proven to be true throughout the coronavirus pandemic. Indeed, reading and writing have served as a great remedy to the pains produced by the global predicament we find ourselves in. Especially reading.

As a result of the pandemic-related lockdowns, halted travel plans, less commuting, and an overall increase in time spent in the comfort of my own home, circumstances have provided a unique and unexpected opportunity over the past year to focus on what the great French Dominican A.G. Sertillanges calls “the intellectual life.”¹ The circumstances of the pandemic have especially been conducive to my reading of more good books, both for formal and informal purposes, due to the dramatic increases in time and solitude since January 2020.

Of all intellectual activities, reading has above all been a solace and joy throughout the pandemic. Reading has a sort of pride of place among all other intellectual activities. It is the “hinge” upon which much of the intellectual life turns. As Sertillanges puts

1. See A.G. Sertillanges, OP, *The Intellectual Life: Its Spirit, Conditions, Methods*, trans. Mary Ryan (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1998).

it, “Reading is the universal means of learning, and it is the proximate or remote preparation for every kind of production.”² More than that, he writes, reading enters us into a vast collaboration with great minds. Through reading, we are always thinking in company, and often great company—especially if we are reading good books.

Knowledge work

We live in the digital age. We have never had more information at our fingertips. The cardinal difficulty is converting information into knowledge, and knowledge (knowing *that* something is the case) into understanding (knowing *why* something is the case). The current pandemic has created a prime opportunity for education—for the pursuit of knowledge and understanding—given the lightened travel schedules, social distancing, and increased solitude.

We have, writes C.S. Lewis, a desire to pursue “knowledge and beauty, in a sense, for their own sake, but in a sense which does not exclude their being for

2. Sertillanges, *The Intellectual Life*, 145.

God's sake." Something exists within us that makes us want to pursue truth and beauty, even during times of war or plague. We have an inherent and irrevocable appetite for truth and beauty (*and* goodness, for that matter), as Lewis reminds us in his essay "Learning in War-Time":

An appetite for these things exists in the human mind, and God makes no appetite in vain. We can therefore pursue knowledge as such, and beauty, as such, in the sure confidence that by so doing we are either advancing to the vision of God ourselves or indirectly helping others to do so.³

My work at the Word on Fire Institute has been a great blessing during the pandemic, as it has allowed me daily to escape the trials of the current circumstances by immersing myself in the intellectual life. But escape has not been the lone benefit. For thinking about God and his Church readily spills over (if we let it) into prayer and an abiding sense that all will be well. St. Paul reminds us of our proper spiritual

3. C.S. Lewis, "Learning in War-Time," C.S. Lewis website, <https://www.cslewis.com/learning-in-war-time/>.

posture as Christians, even when we find ourselves drowning in a sea of troubles: “The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:5–7). As St. Peter learned on the Sea of Galilee, even when it feels as though we’re drowning, the Prince of Peace is always there with an outstretched hand to steady and save us (Matt. 14:22–32).

One of the great pleasures of my work at the Institute in the earlier months of the pandemic was researching and writing about the work of Msgr. Robert Sokolowski, a living legend among Catholic philosophers and one of the great spiritual and intellectual influences of Bishop Barron. I coordinated my graduate studies (I’m currently pursuing a master’s degree in philosophy) with my work at Word on Fire, enrolling in a class in phenomenology—the “style” of philosophy Sokolowski specializes in—in anticipation of future articles and lessons for the Word on Fire Institute that I hope to devote to his ideas.

Among Msgr. Sokolowski's most influential ideas is an articulation of God's nature by which he makes a critical distinction between the divine nature and ours. The distinction, as he makes it, paves the way for important corrections to theological misunderstanding in a culture deeply confused about God. We are like God, made in his image and likeness. But God is not like us—that is, he is not dependent on other goods for his fulfillment and greatness. He is perfect *in himself*. God plus the world, contends Sokolowski, is not greater, nor more perfect, than God himself. What this means is that God does not *need* the world (nor we who dwell within it). He is infinitely happy, we might say, with or without creation. As such, to put it as St. Anselm did, he is “that than which nothing greater can be thought.”⁴

The key point is this: God created us, not because he had to, but because he wanted to. He willed us into being out of love, that we might enjoy perfect happiness with him. Existence is a pure gift. The Creator is a God of infinite grace and mercy. He has given us life and the opportunity for ultimate fulfillment—and all

4. Anselm, *Proslogion* 2–5.

of that “for free.” Moreover, he has not, and will not, revoke his offer of eternal bliss despite our sin—that is, our turning away from him. God’s life-giving love has no limits. He has shown us this most tangibly by taking on a finite human nature (without compromising anything of his divine nature), and then suffering and dying for our sins. The eternal life he has intended for us all along is ever on offer.

God is the greatest conceivable being, with or without us. But he has willed that we might share in his happiness; moreover, he has gone to the extreme to make it possible for us. Sokolowski has been one of the great articulators of this all-encompassing truth of the Christian faith, and diving deep into his thought was one of the great highlights of my knowledge work since the pandemic has struck. Though I have never met him, he has emerged in my life as a spiritual and intellectual mentor through his books. This is one of the wonderful powers that books hold during hard times: books can bring the wisest of the wise into our presence, and intimately so, even if they are physically at a distance or even long past dead.

Books in our home

The best books—or at least the best reading experiences—are often those unburdened by obligation. Since the onset of the pandemic, many of the books I have read have been simply for enjoyment. Many, too, I’ve read for the sake of educating (or simply entertaining) my three children.

Now, here’s a little bit about my family’s “philosophy of reading.” We love books in our home. We like to read, but we also just like having books around. Our house is filled with books of every kind. On the shelves scattered throughout the house, you’ll find many of the works of Shakespeare, Dickens, and Hemingway, as well as Austen, Eliot, and Brontë. You’ll find contemporary storytellers like Wendell Berry and Diana Gabaldon. You’ll see the epics of Homer; the poetry of George Herbert, Robert Browning, and T.S. Eliot; the philosophical works of Aristotle and Edmund Burke; histories by Arnold Toynbee and Winston Churchill; books by Cicero, Darwin, Belloc, and Chesterton; and all of these right next to, or mixed among, books from the likes of Richard Feynman, Jim Collins, Joseph

Epstein, Harold Bloom, Malcolm Gladwell, and Nassim Nicholas Taleb, all contemporary writers worth reading. And, of course, being Catholic, our shelves are heartily stocked with books by and about the saints, including biographies and classic works of spirituality. There are works of theology intermingled with collections of sermons, prayers, poetry, and essays, and books about sacraments, sacramentals, fasting, exorcism, Church history, and Bible study.

Our vision and hope are well-encapsulated in a particular recollection of C.S. Lewis, written in *Surprised by Joy*, about his childhood. “I am a product,” he writes, “of long corridors, empty sunlit rooms, upstairs indoor silences, attics explored in solitude, distant noises of gurgling cisterns and pipes, and the noise of wind under the tiles. Also, of endless books.”⁵ Lewis captures the essence of our desire: to provide a home life for our children that, at every turn, offers nourishment to reason and imagination. We would like for them to grow up in a home where they can read almost anything they want, and where they can find *in it* almost anything they would want to read.

5. C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harvest, 1965), 10.

Although a houseful of books—some full of truth and others full of error—is not everybody’s utopian vision, it is ours. Lewis captures our vision in a reminiscence worth sharing at length:

My father bought all the books he read and never got rid of any of them. There were books in the study, books in the drawing room, books in the cloakroom, books (two deep) in the great bookcase on the landing, books in a bedroom, books piled as high as my shoulder in the cistern attic, books of all kinds reflecting every transient state of my parents’ interest, books readable and unreadable, books suitable for a child and books most emphatically not. Nothing was forbidden me. In the seemingly endless rainy afternoons I took volume after volume from the shelves. I had always the same certainty of finding a book that was new to me as a man who walks into a field has of finding a new blade of grass.⁶

My wife, Amanda, and I have three children; our oldest is six. Though our children are only yet

6. C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 10.

learning to read, we still try to challenge them with more complex stories. We read to them often, and for every few Berenstain Bears or Llama, Llama books, we'll pull something off the shelves like a volume of the Chronicles of Narnia or a Roald Dahl book. We're also big fans of *The 20th Century Children's Book Treasury*, Mary Engelbreit's *Mother Goose: One Hundred Best-Loved Verses*, and William J. Bennett's *The Children's Book of Virtues*. To get them started on Shakespeare at a young age, we've found Charles Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare* to be a great resource.

Looking ahead, we also invested in the Illustrated Classics collection (which has been around since I was a child). Abridged and rewritten for young readers, this collection gives parents an easy way to read classics of literature like Dicken's *A Tale of Two Cities* or Wells' *The Invisible Man*, and eventually allows the kids themselves to tap into the great tradition at a relatively young age. Like a good children's Bible (we like *The Jesus Story Bible* by Sally Lloyd-Jones), these classics provide children with the gist of the greatest stories ever written in Western culture, and the illustrations keep the kids attentive even when the stories become

a little tougher to follow. All in all, we have learned that our kids are far more receptive and capable as learners—through listening especially—than we initially assumed.

Though there's always room for improvement on our part, Amanda and I made it a priority during the pandemic—especially since we were spending an irregular amount of time together as I worked from home—to take the time to read to our kids. Though it was already a priority for us pre-pandemic, we read more than ever to our kids during the stay-at-home order.

In addition to the bonding opportunities it provided, reading to our children also set the stage for discussions about what we believe as Catholics. Moreover, it allowed us to further introduce our children to the value of a life enriched with learning—even when out of school!—that they might ultimately, themselves, seek to know all they can about what is true, good, and beautiful, and conform their lives to such discoveries.

Being a knowledge worker, I am constantly immersed in “information.” The information

overload has been all the worse during the pandemic as I've struggled to stay informed about relevant issues. Thus, it has been more critical than ever that I find time to step away from all the data, facts, and arguments, and find repose in good *stories*. As Mr. Miyagi of *Karate Kid* wisely teaches, "Lesson for whole life. Whole life have a balance. Everything be better." I mostly read nonfiction. But sometimes I just need to balance things out a bit. Though I have more of an affinity for nonfiction, I've learned that fiction nonetheless has an invaluable place in my life. As invigorating and satisfying as it is to lose myself in Thomas Aquinas and Robert Sokolowski, I know that the health of my soul (i.e., intellect and will) depends on me occasionally losing myself in a good story. Since the pandemic struck, Canadian author and artist Michael O'Brien's work has been precisely the mode of nourishment, spiritual and imaginative, that I have needed.

O'Brien's latest book, *The Lighthouse*, is one of his shortest novels and tells the story of an introverted lighthouse keeper as he ponders the meaning of life and the significance of companionship. The book

touches on the value of both community and solitude, and shows how they are not mutually exclusive. It also challenges the reader to contemplate the fine distinctions between solitude and silence, and silence and quiet. Moreover, O'Brien shows just how fine the line is between solitude and loneliness. During a time of lockdowns and social distancing, O'Brien's novel served as a deeply stirring reminder of our existential predicament, and the importance of intimacy, human and divine, as the only real cure. Though we are never quite at home in the world, we feel most at home within the context of friendship—especially friendship with God. Neither God nor neighbor are expendable. And often, we are reminded, the best place to nurture such friendship is in solitude.

Perhaps the most ironic book choice I made during the pandemic was O'Brien's *Plague Journal*. Even before the term "COVID" entered my vocabulary, it was my sincere intention at the onset of 2019 to read it, at the bidding of Amanda who had read it at the end of 2018. We both have been long-time fans of O'Brien's work, an author who has earned the praises of some of the Catholic world's

most venerated writers. In Peter Kreeft's words, for instance, "O'Brien is a superior spiritual story teller worthy to join the ranks of Flannery O'Connor, Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, and C. S. Lewis."⁷ That's some fairly distinguished company.

Plague Journal is the second book of a trilogy placed within a larger series of six novels published by Ignatius Press called Children of the Last Days. The series is a sort of "apocalyptic epic," and it provides an imaginative account of how things could go if the civilized world, both inside the Church and outside, were to fall into the next level of corruption and secularization. Ultimately, the books offer a vision of how the "end times" might unfold socially, politically, and ecclesiastically. The books are realistic, poignant, and unsettling. They are eloquent, spiritually insightful, and at times poetic.

The books included in the Children of the Last Days series offer a penetrating look at human brokenness and the reality of evil, seen and unseen. But like the great Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevski, O'Brien possesses the ability to soak even his most

7. Peter Kreeft, endorsement for Michael O'Brien, *Strangers and Sojourners* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997).

tragic novels with hope; hope that flows especially from the fact of divine mercy; hope that pierces the heart. In contrast to Flannery O'Connor who writes about the offer of "grace, usually refused," O'Brien's stories tend to be about the offer of "grace, probably accepted."

We need both kinds of stories. The final spiritual state of O'Brien's characters is not always crystal clear, but there is always a pressing sense of hope nonetheless. There are unexpected conversions, and there are expected conversions that never *seem* to happen. And there is something undeniably fitting about this ambiguity. For in the real world, we often do not know for certain how it all ends for souls. We thus ultimately abandon ourselves to a filial trust in God's mercy. Mercy, both human and divine, is always on offer in the stories of Michael O'Brien. Divine providence is always active and palpable, though it often unfolds in unexpected ways. Such features make each of O'Brien's novels as much a religious retreat as an imaginative adventure. And his novels have been a great blessing to me throughout the pandemic.

I'm not going to tell you what *Plague Journal* is about. You'll have to read it. But before you do, read *Strangers and Sojourners*, the volume which precedes it. A few years ago, I met one of Michael O'Brien's sons. I asked him which of his dad's books he thought was the best. He thought it was *Strangers and Sojourners*. This, again, is the first book of the trilogy that exists within the larger series.

My wife and I have gifted *Strangers and Sojourners* to friends on a number of occasions. Maybe we're especially haunted by it because it takes place in the mountains of British Columbia, a region of Canada we both love and which is familiar especially to my wife. *Strangers and Sojourners* takes place in the early 1900s, when life was much simpler and the human experience of the day-to-day more pure. Both Amanda and I are romantics, often stricken with nostalgia for the Motherland (now that we live in Texas) and for the "old days" when microwaves, TVs, and smartphones had not yet taken over the world. In *Strangers and Sojourners*, you encounter the simplicity of times past mingled with the timeless problems of sin and doubt faced by every human

person. “No novel since Dostoyevski has nourished my soul like *Strangers and Sojourners*,”⁸ writes Kreeft.

Plague Journal, though shorter and much less complex, adds to the spiritual sustenance of the first novel. Fittingly, during a time like ours that is marred with strife and uncertainty, O’Brien’s books remind us that, here, we truly are in the state of journeying toward our final home. Christ will come again—and for all we know, it may be today. But whether our worldly journey ends with Christ’s Second Coming or with death, the need to be prepared—spiritually and practically—was powerfully reinforced for us through the reading of these books.

Given the global scope of the crisis we are still immersed in—with or without such books as I’ve just mentioned—we’ve all been forced to think about the reality of the “last things.” Whether it be sickness, death, unemployment, or some other pain inflicted by the pandemic, we have all been forced in some way to reckon with the reality of suffering in our own lives. “Life is suffering,”⁹ Jordan Peterson has famously

8. Peter Kreeft, endorsement for Michael O’Brien, *Strangers and Sojourners*.

9. Jordan Peterson, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2018), xvii, 338.

repeated to his audiences. And there are days when it certainly seems true. Suffering is inescapable in every person's life. But for the Christian, life is always more than suffering. Life is also a gift—a gift of infinite proportion. It is the corridor, the means, to heaven. And the imperfections of this life—the trials, the pains, the tragedies, the heartaches—are all meant, in the final analysis, not to be walls but means to grace, healing, and sanctity. That is why St. Paul was able to *rejoice* in his suffering—because Christ made it possible for our suffering, great and small, to be redemptive (see Col. 1:24).

For the Christian, then, suffering is life. Many of the best books I've read over the past year have reminded me of this staggering paradox—a fact that has given me life and kept me going during this coronavirus pandemic. And a fact I might have too easily forgotten were it not for the consolation of books.

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Three Lessons for Parish Communication in the Time of COVID

MATTHEW WARNER

The challenges presented by COVID this past year certainly demonstrated the necessity of digital tools for parish communication. But it also further revealed their insufficiency—they won't fix our problems by themselves. Here are three lessons learned that every parish and diocesan leader needs to understand as they think about parish communication going forward.

LESSON #1—The 82%

One of the most fundamental mistakes we see parish leaders repeatedly make when it comes to communication (digital or otherwise) is the failure to recognize the different subsets of people within their community. There are lots of ways to break this down. Here's

a (very) simple way that will make a huge difference for communication in every parish: the 7%, the 11%, and the 82%.

The 7%

The 7% (based on Dynamic Catholic's well-known research) are the ones who do almost all of the financial giving and volunteering at an average parish. The 7% are, for the most part, "in." They've stuck with us through the scandals and the many other shortcomings of the members of the Church. They are relatively easy to communicate with. They read the bulletin, listen to announcements, check the website, show up to the parish mission, read your emails, and *may* even download your app or follow you on social media. Most will be back to Mass if they aren't already.

The 11%

The 11% are at the other end of the spectrum. This is the percentage of Catholics who still identify as

Catholic but never attend Mass—ever. And, no surprise, they are still not coming back. While they still need to be evangelized and the parish could help, it is not the most immediate problem (opportunity!) at a parish.

The 82%

In between the two extremes of the 7% (most engaged) and the 11% (not engaged), you have what we call the 82%. These folks are still showing up . . . sometimes! At least they were, before the COVID lockdowns.

Some of them (14 out of the 82%) were faithful weekly Mass attendees pre-COVID (they just weren't volunteering or donating). The rest of the 82% (the vast majority) come to Mass less frequently—that is, monthly, every other week, or possibly just at Christmas, Easter, or Ash Wednesday.

For the 82%—most of them anyway—the sacraments are not a top priority: they regularly miss Mass, rarely or never go to Confession, etc. But they still showed up out of either some positive attachment to their faith, or nostalgia that was already weakening,

or a habit which now, thanks to COVID, they may no longer have. Of course, they were already insensitive to the Sunday obligation, so its reinstitution likely won't change much (though it does serve as an interesting opportunity to re-propose it to folks who didn't understand it before!).

Many in this group were already, in general, slowly drifting out of your parish. (Remember that six people leave for every one that joins.) Each year, fewer of them were coming back. The Church had not yet figured out a way to reverse this overall trend, and now COVID has come along and, I fear, fast-forwarded the exodus. How much? We don't know yet.

The 82% is where our challenge was pre-COVID. This is where the challenge remains today. I say "challenge," but it's really an *opportunity*. The Church must learn to connect with the 82%. It starts with naming them as such and understanding that they are different than most parish leaders (who are typically in the 7% themselves).

The 82% were still showing up (pre-COVID)! At some points during the year, they were and are standing right in front of us. They are not faceless

people to be found “out there” on a social network. They are sitting next to us in the pews, listening to what we have to say, giving us the chance to build a better relationship with them. But we have, too often, wasted that opportunity. And now they are the ones most at risk of not coming back.

Most parish leaders have good intentions of reaching the 82%. But in practice, many of the study programs, parish missions, approaches taken, and language used end up mostly resonating with the 7%—*not* the 82%. The software, content, and communication tools they think will help (parish mobile apps, social media channels, on-demand digital content libraries, high-touch big-data-style ChMS solutions, etc.) mostly only work with the 7%!

Why do parish leaders, though very well-intentioned, continue to fail at engaging the 82%?

Because the folks making these decisions are typically among the 7% themselves. And the complaints they listen to come from the 7%. And most of the money donated comes from the 7%. It's all happening within the “7% Bubble.” So it's only natural for them to see everything through that lens, but it's a key

reason why parishes have failed to succeed at engaging those slowly drifting away (the 82%). To be successful, they must break out of that 7% feedback loop, get intentional about precisely who they are trying to reach, and be willing to try a different approach. That is step one for coming back from COVID.

LESSON #2—Directly reaching parishioners when you need to most

When the lockdowns and restrictions hit, we found out quickly just how well every bishop and parish could directly reach their flock.

The printed bulletin only works if people are showing up and, even then, only a small percentage of parishioners read it. Social media and dedicated mobile apps fall dramatically short as well and will continue to do so, as the majority of parishioners will not follow their parish on social media, nor will they bother to download the parish app. Those channels are okay at reaching the 7%, but that's about it. And most parishioners are not going out of their way to

proactively check the parish website, though many more did during COVID. And the importance of making the most popular information easy to find on your parish's mobile responsive website was, and remains to be, very important.

But if those are all a parish had when this thing hit, they found themselves extremely unprepared. And those platforms aren't the best way to reach most of the flock, anyway, pandemic or not. Especially if we want to reach those we need to reach most: the 82%.

Parishes and dioceses must invest in more direct channels that are also more platform-independent. And in that regard, there is nothing better than email and text messaging.

If you have a parishioner's email address and cell phone number, you can 1) directly reach them at a moment's notice and 2) use them on any number of different tools and platforms (i.e., if the owner of the tech company currently controlling a particular channel, tool, social network, or app store decides to censor you or get in the way, you can take that email address or cell phone number and use them somewhere else and still directly reach your people). In this regard,

there are no other communication channels anywhere near as valuable as email and text messaging. None.

Furthermore, these are the channels (email and texting) that work best at reaching the less-engaged parishioners (the 82%) anyway. Mostly because these less-engaged parishioners don't have to create an account, download an app, log in somewhere, or otherwise *do* anything to receive the information. They are already checking their email and text message inboxes all day long. It is simple, and it works.

Fortunately, many parishes and dioceses had already learned this and were prepared when COVID hit, having collected email addresses and cell phone numbers, and equipped their leaders with simple tools to use them effectively. Unfortunately, there were still many parishes and dioceses caught flat-footed, having not invested in reliable ways to build these lists and utilize text messaging and email as the backbone of their digital communication. This is evidenced by the fact that Flocknote (our text messaging and email service for parishes) grew more in the two months after COVID hit than in the first five years we existed.

Only when you can directly reach folks and talk

to them do you then have a chance at leading them through this, hearing their needs to better serve them, or doing other practical things like communicating schedule changes or getting them to donate money online (online giving being another essential tool for parishes during this time). And with the uncertainty of whether the 82% will fully return post-COVID, we must find ways now to spark engagement with them that will inspire them to take a step closer into, not further out of, their parish. That starts with being able to directly reach them.

LESSON #3—Actions speak louder than words

Through all this, the most powerful message sent to parishioners was not among the ones communicated by text message, website, email, or any digital tool or media. It was the message communicated by the *actions* of our leaders. People saw what we did. And that message rang out loud and clear. In some cases, it was an incredibly inspiring message. In others, it wasn't.

The early Christians risked extremely high

chances of death and imprisonment to celebrate Mass and receive the Eucharist. They went to great lengths to do it as safely as possible, even sometimes going underground in the catacombs. St. Tarcisius, only a boy, was martyred while bravely attempting to sneak the Eucharist in to imprisoned Christians who desired the Lord more than anything else. Throughout all history (and even still today), Christians have risked their lives to receive the sacraments, living where Christianity is illegal or regularly walking many treacherous miles just to see a priest. What message did such actions communicate? A timelessly inspiring one that reverberates down to us still to this day, thousands of years later, and which was the foundation for the Gospels being carried to the ends of the earth.

What message will our actions now send? How important is the parish, the Church, our faith, the sacraments? Our actions under pressure, in these trying times, communicate that more loudly and clearly than anything else.

I'm not suggesting recklessness with human life and health, though it's worth reflecting upon what St.

Tarcisius would have considered “reckless.” But regardless of the level of various risks and dangers brought by COVID-19 (which are certainly real and must be weighed), that is not actually my point here. Many will rightly study and debate all of that for some time. Good. And we should give one another, especially our leaders, a lot of grace as we’ve all struggled to navigate an unprecedented situation rife with uncertainty.

This is not the time to point fingers at others about how poorly or how well they’ve done thus far. It’s time to act. This moment in time will be a key turning point for many of the 82%. Will they continue their slow drift out of the Church? Or will we use this opportunity to remind them why they started coming in the first place?

The question for us now is how heroic of an effort are we willing to make, within whatever limitations we have, to get people the sacraments and care for their needs? What are we willing to risk? Where does attending Mass fall in the priority list among getting haircuts, buying groceries, and going to school in our community?

What we do now will tell them everything they need to know about what their Catholicism is for

and where and how it should fit into their lives. What message will we send?

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In the Gap: COVID and the Religious Life

SR. JOSEPHINE GARRETT

Perhaps you have come for just such a time as this. Throughout our common experience of COVID, and all that has come after it, these words from the fourth chapter of the book of Esther have continually come to mind. Was I born for this time? Were we all born for this time? If so, what gifts am I called to contribute so that God's love might reign? What will happen if I refuse? As I mulled over these questions, my mind continually returned to the gift of religious life—particularly our vows and our common life. I am certain we were all born for this time, and I am also certain that religious life was born for times like these: to speak of the will of the Father, the hope that comes through Jesus, and the work of the Spirit. We religious are called to be a sign that peace is always possible because Jesus rose from the dead.

Walking dead

Early in my formal discernment and formation to be a religious sister, I was sitting with my formation director on one of our patio swings. The time was approaching for me to move from the stage of affliacy to postulancy, and we were discussing religious garb, likely because the postulancy is when a woman begins to wear some form of religious attire. She looked at me, and in her usual matter-of-fact manner, she made this point: our religious garb is a sign that we are walking dead. The color black signifies this and reminds us of this. The conversation was not going where I thought it was going! Walking dead? She went on to explain. Religious, in a way, are walking dead in the world, since our life is (or we hope it to be) a sign of the life to come, a sign of eternal life, which we enter into through the door of death. Religious life is a sign that God's endgame is a wedding banquet, and the marriage is between God and the Church, brought to fulfillment when we respond fully to God's gift of himself in his Son, Jesus. So we walk as though dead;

we walk as a sign of that ultimate marriage that all are called to in heaven.

That day, she was opening my mind to the prophetic dimension of our life as religious sisters. I would go on to learn that our life, and the pillars it stands on, always have something to say in the world, and should always be a sign and beacon pointing toward the mission of Jesus and the will of God the Father. The prophetic dimensions of religious life flow from the vows and the common life.

The three vows taken by most religious are the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. The vow of poverty proclaims that we have nothing of our own power; that all is gift, so we stand, gratefully, like the *anawim* of the Old Testament, the poor of God. The *anawim* were open and receptive before God, who provided for all their needs. This is true for us, and God even provided the breath we just drew. This flies in the face of our self-sufficient culture, which often asserts that what I have I got on my own because I am a self-made man. The vow of chastity—which I prefer to speak of as celibacy—unleashes a deep and radical belonging. Celibacy asserts that I belong to no

one person so that I might belong to all, and call everyone my family. Celibacy flies in the face of the lies of division and tribalism. The vow of obedience (from the Latin *obedire*, “to listen to”) proclaims an ongoing deep listening to God and one’s religious superior. Obedience is then a sort of listening that goes so far and deep that it enters the will and becomes action. The action of doing what God wants us to do. This flies in the face of our culture, which has plugged its ears to God’s law and will, much like those who martyred the deacon St. Stephen, reject the fatherhood of God and say, “I will do what I want, be what I want; I will do what pleases me, not God.”

And then there is the crown, the common life. People who did not handpick one another live, work, serve, pray, and strive and struggle for holiness together because of their belief in the Gospel. When the world says we will never see eye to eye, that we will always be at war, that we should respond to oppression with oppression, and that we should fight fire with fire, the common life says the opposite. The common life says, “I will become family with strangers. I will share life with people I did not personally choose, but that God

chose for me. I will learn to love across cultures and across families of origin. I will learn to forgive, and I will learn to receive forgiveness.”

Are we family?

With the dawn of COVID, all these dimensions were tested. The main question we had to answer in our convents was this: Are we family? Do we still pray together, eat together, and recreate together? Since we are not blood relatives, do we retreat to our corners and stay distant? We have multiple houses in our area—are they our family? Should we go to one another’s convents? We have sisters who serve in hospitals in our area; what should our precautions look like there? What are the limits of our household; where do we draw the line? It all boiled down to that fundamental question: Are we family? We decided—or rather affirmed—what was true: we are indeed family. But whereas in many households the parents or care-givers sat down together to decide how to navigate the pandemic, we had to essentially hold large-scale family meetings and decide together

how we would all navigate this as a family. Would we take our shoes off when coming into the house? Would we shower and change and not be in the house in the same clothes we wore out to ministry? Should we decrease our common prayer to reduce exposure? Or should we add more Adoration and enter more deeply into our duty to pray for our world and our communities?

It was a long and sometimes painful discernment, because our differences were colliding like Mack trucks on an expressway as we dealt with our own fears and uncertainties while trying to live out the call of our common life. Because—not to cause scandal—but the divisions afflicting the world are found under the roofs of convents as well. I remember once helping with early voting during a presidential election year in one of our larger convents. We helped our elderly sisters with early mail-in voting. At that time, they had to declare a party to vote early. I was helping two sisters with the process. I went to the first one and anxiously asked what, to me, seemed like a really personal question: “Sister, are you a Democrat or a Republican?” She responded assertively,

“Republican!” as though there was no other response. I thanked her. I then approached the second sister and asked, again very awkwardly: “Sister, are you a Democrat or a Republican?” And she responded, also assertively, “Oh gosh, Democrat, of course!” I thanked her. We had a house divided! The divisions that afflict the world don’t disappear in the convent; we are just tasked with kingdom vision and kingdom responses in the midst of these differences. We are tasked with the duty to strive for oneness and leverage differences to that end, rather than allowing them to create a gap between us. Our differences coupled with fear made the response to and planning for COVID hard, but we had the values of our vows to stand on, and a common love for God and his mission, that they might be one.

A tangible expression of the spiritual gap

I use a Theology of the Body curriculum for grade school students in my guidance counseling program. There is a question I love to ask the kids when we are

beginning with those lessons. I ask them, “Is there any way to show love or kindness or any virtue without using your body?” They will say you can pray, but don’t you need a brain to pray? They will say a smile—but don’t you use your mouth to smile? A wink? Well, that is with your eye. Squeeze a hand? I think your hands are a part of your body. We go in circles for a while, and they soon realize that our bodies are needed to make the invisible visible. Even when our bodies have serious disabilities and limitations, there is always some sign. There is a sacramentality to our bodies. COVID created physical distance at an unprecedented level. I spoke with a friend during the initial shutdown who lives alone, and she could not remember the last time she was hugged. Six feet or more became the standard. We were distanced from extended family, the elderly members of our family, our friends, our coworkers, and, when churches closed, we even seemed to be experiencing distance from God. Screens stood between us and our loved ones. Screens stood between us and the sacramental presence of Jesus.

But I don’t think anything entirely new was

happening. Had there not been a spiritual gulf growing between us all along? Was this tangible reality revealing something that had been spiritually true all along? When we could be close, did we make eye contact? When we could be close, did we listen long enough to even know how someone answered the question “How are you?” Were we steeped in a culture amassing more and more mechanisms of division through label after label after label? Labels of race, labels of gender, labels of sexual orientation, labels of political ideology; an endless onslaught of labels that were further dividing us, with the label of God’s child, the only one to unite us, being viciously swallowed up in the chaos. COVID gave us a chance to add to our labels: mask people, anti-mask people, vaxxers, anti-vaxxers; and then it seems like the isolation brought about an overflow of our common woundedness, and we heard labels like racist, fascist, and communist emerging in our day-to-day conversations. It may be unpleasant, but I need to say it. We were far off from one another—and, as a Church, in many ways far off from our God—well before social distancing.

I live in East Texas, which unfortunately has an

unshakeable reputation of a higher prevalence of racism. I struggle with fear when I drive home to Houston from Tyler because I have to take a lot of back roads, the cell service is not very good, and I feel afraid to run into trouble and run into someone who has a problem with my black skin. In the late fall, my godmother died, and there was a small graveside service planned because COVID cases were rising and a larger service seemed too risky. I wanted to be present, so I hopped on those back roads for a one-day round trip. I was in Houston a little longer than planned, so I ended up doing some of the return drive in the dark. My anxiety reached a peak level because of the darkness. I had a huge headache and needed to stop for water, so I pulled into a gas station. I looked around for other people of color and saw none; everyone was white. I saw a guy in what looked like overalls that someone would have worn in that *Duck Dynasty* show. No one was wearing a mask. I entered the store and saw more camouflage clothing and long scruffy beards. I was reeling with fear. My biases stored safely in my brain were in overdrive, and they had fully activated my reptilian brain, shutting down my reasoning and

logical brain. My breath was quick, my face hot, and my body was telling me I was in danger and needed to prepare myself to fight or flee—all because of beards, white skin, and camouflage coupled with the biases that mostly media and not my personal experience had masterfully helped my brain develop and foster. I got my water, got back in my car, and got out of there as quickly as I could.

Immediately the phone rang, and I answered on the car speaker. It was a friend, a new friend that I made while living in East Texas. She is a good woman. She is a southern woman. She is a white woman. We have a lot in common in our hearts; we don't have a lot in common on the surface. Her call reminded me to pause, to calm down, to check my biases, to draw from the graces given to me in the vows and the common life, and to remember I belong to Jesus, and so does she, and so do the bearded camouflaged, white men.

Standing with Jesus

I took a thirty-day retreat in preparation for my final vows. It was based on St. Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*.

As I reflect on our core call in the midst of COVID, and where I think we will know spiritual fulfillment and Gospel joy, the contemplation of the two standards comes to mind. The word “standard” in this case means flag, and the person praying this contemplation is asked to reflect on the standard of Christ and the standard of the world. The question for the retreatant is, Where do I stand? I think this is our question now, and a path forward that will probably not have the spicy sensation of the snarky rhetoric we have become accustomed to, even among some of our most followed Catholics, but it will sustain us and provide an unfailing assurance.

When I prayed that reflection on the thirty-day retreat, I think I missed completely what Jesus wanted to say to me. That day, I imagined myself on an empty field with Jesus. To my left were many workers, people sacrificing in service and ministry, working to serve the sick and the poor for Jesus. To my right were a large group of Catholic celebrities. They had beauty lights in their faces, cameras on them, and podcast microphones at their mouths. They were chattering and chattering, talking to people about Catholic

things and Jesus. Both groups took very little notice of others, and there was really no battle taking place. Jesus was there, in the gulf between the two, on an empty field. That day, I believed Jesus was saying to me that the battle isn't what I think it is. During that prayer, occasionally someone would stop what they were doing on one side and go over to the other. That day, during that prayer, I thought Jesus was asking me to go to my left, and work and serve the sick and the poor.

Today, I am sure I got it wrong. Today my eyes go back to Jesus on that field. Isn't being with him the best place to be? Looking at him? Kneeling before God incarnate, his Eucharistic flesh as the standard? Standing with him in the gap? Standing with him in the gulf? Doing whatever he asks and whatever he needs, no matter what it looks like, whether it is serving the sick, the poor, the wealthy, speaking about the Gospel, serving children, or serving people who are elderly, as long as it is not only in his name but united with him? What would happen if an army of us stood in the gap, focused on Jesus? This is the common life that religious sisters strive for. We close

the gaps of division. We are a critique against the lie that division has the last say. We move the needle on the desire God the Father has that we may be one in his Son and according to his will and his law. We do this first in our own homes. We strive to prevent our differences from creating ongoing gulfs between us. We strive to stand with Jesus in our homes, and then we strive to take what we are discovering of that in our common life and share it in ministry. When we stand with Jesus, we look with his eyes, and we see what he always sees: God's children.

A childhood friend of mine recently published a book about her mother's death and her process of grief. The book is titled *The Lampblack Blue of Memory: My Mother Echoes*. Her mother was a strikingly beautiful woman, not only in physical appearance, but in her spirit—an incredibly joyful and Christian woman. My friend and I lived on the same street from elementary school through high school. When we were sixteen years old, her mother did not return from a run. It was later discovered that, while on her run, she had been killed. The man who killed her confessed to the murder and recounted the story. He

said my friend's mother had tried to tell him about herself as they struggled, hoping that making herself more human to him would stop him. She eventually repeatedly told him that she was a Christian. The last words out of her mouth were "I forgive you and God does too." She had arrived at the height of the prophetic ideal of the Gospel values proclaimed in religious life. These are the values that I believe our experiences with COVID are calling us to as we seem increasingly separated and divided. She looked at her enemy, someone who was taking her life, and saw the promise of eternal life, and saw that he was still God's son. The world wants to trivialize this. We even have Catholic leaders who trivialize the idea that our primary identity is as sons and daughters of God and that the answers we need are found in living as sons and daughters of God the Father, united in Christ's Body through the power of his life, death, and Resurrection. That day, Mrs. Adleman stood in that massive gap with Jesus, and left us a powerful legacy; I believe she had the strength to stand there because she believed in the Resurrection.

We are an Easter people

The convent is cloaked in hope. When we get up in the morning to go about daily life with other women who would have otherwise been strangers, it is an act of hope. When we welcome a new sister who has been transferred into our local community and everything has to change all over again as the community takes account of her unique contributions and gifts, it is an act of hope. When we risk the vulnerability of talking through hurts and misunderstandings, it is an act of hope. When we take the time to learn about one another and grow in love, it is an act of hope. These acts are sometimes incredibly ordinary and mundane. But because we otherwise would have been strangers, because if we did not have this love for Jesus binding us together it would not otherwise make sense, it becomes a proclamation that we need now in the midst of COVID. When this disease drives wedges between us that we never imagined, religious life proclaims that for those of us who are an Easter people, there is always a way forward, under the standard of Christ.

Honestly, living this way will throw you in the gap.

When you stand with Jesus, there is rarely a side that feels like home, and it may feel as empty as that field seemed to me in my prayer that day, but we have a safe and sure hope, an anchor, a high priest. I feel as a religious sister that it is my duty to encourage you in this way. During the recent Mass at which I made my final vows, while I was receiving the solemn blessing after professing my vows, the celebrant prayed over me with these words: “May she cherish the Church, teaching all people to look forward in joy and hope to the good things of heaven.” May you stand with him and walk with him, into whatever situation COVID has hurled you. Listen to him, because he will assure you that you were born for a time such as this, and strengthen you in the gap between heaven and earth.

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