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A woman dispenses hand sanitizer to use prior to entering the church sanctuary of St. Gabriel the Archangel Parish March 14 in Neenah, Wisconsin. (CNS/Brad Birkholz)



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Like nearly everybody else on the planet, I have been preoccupied with, concerned about and focused on the novel coronavirus pandemic over the last few weeks. It seems that every hour new information comes across media outlets that would ordinarily be weeklong stories in their own right — professional and college sports are suspended; public liturgies are suppressed by dioceses around the country; travel bans are put into effect; schools from the elementary level to universities have temporarily closed or switched to remote learning; chaos and fear and confusion have ensued.

In the midst of this frightening moment in our history, I considered what more could be said, what perspective could I offer? I am a doctor, but I am not a physician. My expertise in theology and spirituality does not qualify me in any way to add words of wisdom or caution about something best left to epidemiologists and public health specialists. There is enough medical advice (mostly good, though some bogus) already circulating online. But upon considering what I might say in my column this week, I realized that virtually nothing has been said about the theological significance of the communion of saints for this moment.

The doctrine of the communion of saints is an important tenet of our faith but one that few Christians regularly consider. It was added to the Creed sometime around the fifth century, and yet for all its ancient significance it remains largely misunderstood.

Theologian and St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson, professor emerita at Fordham University, stated at the outset of her 1998 book, *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints*, that misconceptions about the doctrine are so prevalent that any effort to talk constructively about the communion of saints requires first identifying what this belief "is *not*." She explains:

> This doctrinal symbol does not in the first instance refer to paradigmatic figures, those outstanding individuals traditionally called "saints," but rather names the whole community of people graced by the Spirit of God. Neither does it point exclusively to those who have died; rather, the community of living persons is its primary referent. Furthermore, while

> obviously interested in human beings, the symbol does not allude to them exclusively but embraces the whole natural world in a "communion of the holy."

At its core, the communion of saints is an affirmation of the empowering, unifying and healing work of the Holy Spirit among all God's people and creation.

The Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, beautifully and succinctly describes the reality of the communion of saints, noting that, "all the faithful, scattered though they be throughout the world, are in communion with each other in the Holy Spirit." A paraphrase of this line also appears in the Roman Missal in Eucharistic Prayer III. Two key elements of the doctrine are expressed in this short line: the role of the Holy Spirit and the communion that people share in the Spirit.

That so few people regularly regard the doctrine of the communion of saints may follow from the fact that so few people care to remember the third person of the Holy Trinity. As I have said before, most Christians generally act as unwitting "Holy Spirit atheists." But that doesn't stop God from being God, and as Spirit, God continually draws near to creation, dwells within each person and leads us onward in salvation history.

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The notion of communion (*koinonia* in Greek) is an important concept to grasp in an effort to understand the doctrine. This term does not merely mean affiliation or association of like-minded folks. It is deeper and more foundational. Communion refers to the bonds of fellowship and interrelatedness formed by the Holy Spirit among the people of God. Because the Spirit is not bound by human laws, prejudices, borders, or any form of demarcation we establish among ourselves, the communion that is shared in the Spirit transcends space, time and even earthly life. For this reason, we can profess the Apostles' Creed with confidence, affirming St. Paul's insight in the New Testament that absolutely nothing, including death, can separate us from the love of God or the communion we share with one another in the Holy Spirit.

This has been an unusually difficult series of weeks for nearly everybody on the planet. The best scientific and medical experts have strongly encouraged the practice of social distancing to help mitigate the spread of the coronavirus, which has prompted the remarkable halting of all regular public gatherings. The imposition of quarantines and self-isolation has challenged much of our usual interpersonal connections and interactions. People are now understandably afraid of standing too closely or even interacting with others at all. And in the face of rising fear — and for some, denial — it can be difficult to recall our shared humanity and ground ourselves in what is most important when the quotidian experience of life is halted or flipped upside down.

It is in this context, however, that the communion of saints can be especially instructive. There are at least three implications that are worth reflecting on and remembering during this difficult time.



A sign outside of St. Matthew Church March 13 in Allouez, Wisconsin (CNS/The Compass/Sam Lucero)

First, we are already always united to one another in the Holy Spirit. This means that though we may not be able to go about interacting with one another, seeing each other in person, or sharing in real time the ordinary and extraordinary events of our lives, we are still bound to one another and connected to each other by God's grace. This communion is not limited to all those living today, but includes a bond with

everyone who has come before us and all those who will come after us in this life.

For many people the suspension of public liturgies last weekend was an especially painful experience. But it's worth recalling that no celebration of the Eucharist is ever truly "private," for the doctrine of the communion of saints reminds us that we are already joined together by the Spirit into the body of Christ. You don't have to livestream a liturgy (as wonderful as that option may be) to be connected to and in communion with the church at worship. Separated though we may be from one another physically, spiritually we are in communion — we just have to call that to mind and embrace it with our hearts.

Second, those of us who are not yet ill but embrace social distancing for the sake of the common good are practicing a form of solidarity that is another reflection of our belief in the communion of saints. This solidarity arising from the communion we share in the Spirit should motivate our behaviors so as to help others and not merely look after ourselves. This is especially true when facing the threat of a highly contagious virus.

Sadly, many young adults who feel they are not at risk or are in denial about the seriousness of the threat have disregarded public health recommendations to avoid crowded settings. Even if one is not in a population most at risk, the flagrant disregard for the safety of others — by becoming a vector for the virus and exposing other, more vulnerable people to the disease — is a rejection of the solidarity called for by our profession of belief in the communion of saints. If we believe the Spirit binds us together in fellowship, then we ought to keep in mind that the decisions we make and the behaviors in which we engage have consequences that extend beyond us and may even threaten the lives of our brothers and sisters.

Finally, as theologians have noted for centuries, in addition to meaning "the communion of saints," the Latin phrase in the creed *communion sanctorum* can also mean "communion in *holy things*." Typically this has been understood to refer to the sacraments, and understandably so. However, we can also expand the notion of "holy things" to include the whole of creation, which is made holy by God's presence throughout the cosmos precisely as Spirit. Too often we are inclined to limit God's presence to the times, places and things of our choosing. And yet, as scripture bears witness, God's Spirit draws near to all of creation, renewing the face of the earth (Psalm 104). There is no person, place, or thing that is outside of God's reach or purview. Whether we are holed up in a precautionary quarantine or find ourselves

isolated in medical treatment or we work in an essential field that prohibits social distancing, God is, as St. Augustine said, always closer to us than we are to ourselves.

During this time when we are inclined to feel under threat and out of control, it is important for us to remember that we are inextricably united to each other in the bond of fellowship through the Holy Spirit. May our recounting of this important Christian doctrine bring us consolation in times of isolation and loneliness, solidarity leading to care of others, and faith in the God who is always already there with us.

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