News
Opinion



Fr. Lou Phillips, pastor of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish in Windham, Maine, holds the Blessed Sacrament April 19 during a "drive-thru" Divine Mercy Sunday blessing in the church parking lot, amid the coronavirus pandemic. (CNS/Courtesy of Portland Diocese)



by Phyllis Zagano

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @phylliszagano

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

May 22, 2020
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Just about everyone seems to have ideas for restarting church, or at least about providing sacraments.

The Thomistic Institute began with advice on confession, went on to Eucharist and anointing, and now is looking at baptism. The Catholic Medical Association put out its pandemic paper and the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions had its own guidelines.

What's a bishop to do? One can imagine him, throwing his hands in the air during his 19th Zoom meeting of the week and singing, or shouting: "Words, words, words! I'm so sick of words."

Well, why not? "My Fair Lady" isn't running anymore.

He may be thinking about ministry, but he is in the middle of the new Communion war.

Some ideas are patently ridiculous. The Thomistic Institute, based at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, D.C., and headed by a Yale-educated priest-lawyer, said Communion on the tongue was OK, but not masks. Just don't forget the hand sanitizer. Its 14-person working group (one woman ...) contributed to the downloadable guidelines.

Meanwhile, the Catholic Medical Association says straight out: Communion should be received in the hand, priest and the communicant wearing masks.

The Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions posts competing diocesan decisions: the bishops of Burlington, Crookston, Gaylord, Honolulu, Lansing and Washington permit Communion on the tongue, while those of Cincinnati, El Paso, Jackson, Milwaukee, Orlando, Springfield, Massachusetts, Toledo and Wheeling-Charleston discourage or forbid it.

Diocesan boundaries make for interesting circumstances, where neighboring bishops disagree on what should happen just across the river or the road. Confusion can replace common sense, but even the bishop of Tyler, Texas, who with Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò called for Pope Francis' resignation last summer, suggests communicants "consider" receiving in the hand. This despite curial Cardinal Robert Sarah's calling Communion in the hand a satanic attack on the Eucharist.

Advertisement

Arguments about procedure obscure the simple question: What is church? We cannot have any expectation of ordinary pre-pandemic Masses soon, but the tease of guidelines and statements raises a false hope.

Meanwhile, the people of God are starving for ministry. Many are simply starving.

The minimal input of women to coronavirus reopening plans is obvious. Any woman who cared for a sick child or parent knows about crowds, good housekeeping and personal hygiene. "Keep your hand out of your mouth" is a playground mantra. Most folks know it is a smart thing to keep other people's hands away from their mouths as well.

Will the men in charge ever listen to women? Will they look across their desks to see who feeds the hungry, gives drink to the thirsty, clothes the naked, shelters the homeless, visits the sick and imprisoned, even buries and mourns the dead?

While many parish and diocesan entities provide food, too often ministry is lacking. Sacraments are crucial, but person-to-person ministry disappears behind mechanized approaches. The Thomistic Institute suggests inviting parishioners to Mass on a rotating basis, perhaps using online ticketing systems such as Eventbrite.

Such avoids the point. People are starved for Eucharist, but rules do not create community and hand sanitizer does not provide grace. The people of God need what Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day called personalism. They need to be loved.

We are in an international ecclesial meltdown that cannot be solved by documents. Things will not return to the way we were, they just will not. Statements — words — are not ministry. Ministry is rooted in the Word.

And church is supposed to be about the Word. It is supposed to be about the Gospel. Only that allows for sacraments.

[Phyllis Zagano is senior research associate-in-residence at Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York. She will speak Oct. 3 at the Voice of the Faithful Conference "Visions of a Just Church" in Newton, Massachusetts, and Oct. 4 at St. Ignatius Church, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts. Her books include *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future* (in Spanish as *Mujeres Diaconos: Pasado, Presente, Futuro*), published in France and Canada as *Des femmes diacres* and in Portugal as *Mulheres diáconos: Passado, presente, futuro*. Study Guides are available for free download at https://sites.hofstra.edu/phyllis-zagano/. Her most recent book is *Women: Icons of Christ*.]

Editor's note: *We can send you an email alert every time Phyllis Zagano's column, Just Catholic, is posted. Click here to sign up for email alerts.*

This story appears in the **Reopening post pandemic** feature series. View the full series.