

Ana Fernandez and Raul Rodriguez pray as they watch Easter Mass through social media during the coronavirus pandemic in Caracas, Venezuela, April 12. (CNS/Carolina Cabral, Reuters)

by Don Brophy

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There's a post-resurrection story in John's Gospel about Jesus appearing to the disciples who were gathered in a room whose doors had been locked. They came together in that place and then suddenly Jesus was there among them. Astonishment!

I've been mulling over that story in this time of coronavirus when we've all been sheltering behind locked doors. It stayed with me when I watched a solitary priest preside at Mass on a website. It continued to haunt me when sharing hopes and prayers with a group of friends on Zoom.

All this virtual togetherness during the pandemic just doesn't cut it. It's not working. Jesus won't be a felt presence until we can gather together again — until we see each other face-to-face, touch each other, brush shoulders, hear each other's voice without electronic filters.



Bishop John Stowe of Lexington, Kentucky, appears in a computer monitor as he celebrates Palm Sunday Mass in his diocese's nearly empty Cathedral of Christ the King April 5, amid the coronavirus pandemic. (CNS/Deacon Skip Olson, Courtesy of Lexington Diocese)

We're learning something in these weeks and months of separation. It's something we couldn't learn until it was taken away. We hunger for "real" presence. We yearn for the time when we can physically come together. Won't that be the day!

Traditional Catholic theology holds that Jesus becomes present when a priest, at Mass, speaks the words of consecration over bread and wine. Well, OK, that's nice. Except that we know from experience that Jesus was already present before the words were spoken. Who "made" Jesus present? We did, by gathering in his name. Once we come together, locked doors can't keep him out.

It is our priesthood of believers that establishes the ground of presence. The priest at Mass merely builds on that ground. One can sense it when witnessing those sad Masses on the internet. Without a congregation present, the whole thing seems to be a hollow exercise, like playing games. Valid? Yes. Real? That's something else again.

This whole business of trying to create a religious experience on the internet is so much heavy lifting. A joker recently suggested that every hour on Zoom cancels ten years in purgatory. Ditto with televised Masses. Keeping each other six feet apart is like putting God there too. What we really crave is God's embrace.

[Don Brophy is the author of *One Hundred Great Catholic Books* and *Catherine of Siena: A Passionate Life*.]

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