Opinion
Spirituality



by NCR Staff

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With the U.S. bishops' conference outlining guidelines for parishes to begin opening their doors for Mass again, there are those who believe it is too soon to open up and those who can't wait to get inside their church again. NCR has published several articles and columns about reopening Masses, which readers are responding to below. Letters have been edited for length and clarity.

Michael Sean Winters' May 29, 2020, article about the bishops of Minnesota slanderously mischaracterizes our actions.

When the bishops of Minnesota wrote the letter Mr. Winters referenced, the state rules would have allowed, as of today (June 1), outside dining for 50, while prohibiting outside gatherings of faith-based groups larger than 10, even if social distancing requirements were met. Imagine, 50 Minnesotans would be able to gather for hotdish on a restaurant patio, but 40 of them would have had to leave if they wanted to use that same space to study the Midrash or pray the rosary, even if they were willing to stay 6 feet apart and wear masks. Eleven silent mourners would have been prohibited from gathering grave-side for a religious rite of commendation but 50 could be accommodated for the post-cemetery luncheon. The disparity in treatment, in the absence of any public health justification, is obvious to everyone but Mr. Winters. It's hard to imagine that this particular ordinance was the type of "just limit of the exercise of religious freedom" envisioned in *Dignitatis Humanae*.

Fortunately, when we finally had the opportunity to point out the disparity in treatment to the governor, the lieutenant governor and the commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Public Health, the executive order was promptly revised. The bishops of Minnesota, seeking equal treatment and not special treatment, unanimously embraced the logic of the new executive order, which limits gatherings to 25% of occupancy or 250 persons, whichever is smaller. While Mr. Winters sees us as culture warriors, I am grateful that the governor sees us as partners in his work for the common good, especially as we together battle this pandemic.

I will always remain grateful to the Becket Fund for helping us focus the governor's attention on our concerns. I suspect those sentiments are shared, moreover, by those who this weekend (May 30-31) throughout Minnesota were able to receive Holy Communion at Sunday Mass for the first time in 11 weeks. As we mourn the tragic death of George Floyd and confront the senseless violence that has afflicted our community these past days, gathering for the Eucharist has been a blessing beyond compare that nourishes us for service.

BERNARD A. HEBDA

Archbishop of St. Paul and Minneapolis

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Right on the money again, Michael Sean Winters. And they didn't even mention the dangers of singing! We in Alameda County, California, are attending virtual church and pining for the sacrament, but knowing we are protecting ourselves and others makes it tolerable. Our pastor in residence is retired Fr. James Schexnayder, and seeing and hearing him is most comforting.

Thank you again for your always clear and intelligent viewpoint.

LYNNE MILLER

Oakland, California

In reference to Joshua J. McElwee's article "Theologians concerned over bishops' plans for 10-person pandemic Masses," did any of the theologians query the theology of a 10-person parish Mass in and of itself?

Surely, it's the presence of the worshipping community itself that is of the essence of Mass anyway. There is something wrong with presuming the sacramentality of the Mass depends primarily on the presence of the priest only?

GERARD BENNETT

St. Albans, Australia



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You refer to concerns being expressed by theologians, relating to the recent U.S. bishop's guidelines for pandemic Masses. This seems to me to be less of an issue of theology and more a question of common sense.

If a 10-person Mass is the optimum recommended response to satisfy current health concerns, then surely it is too soon to consider a relaxation of the present restrictions and, in purely practical terms, how can this be realistically organized? We have been without public Masses for a matter of weeks, whereas there are parts of the world where Catholics are presently deprived of Holy Communion for months or even years because of a lack of Masses — which in my view is where the real theological focus ought to be directed.

I also find it difficult to understand why anyone would wish to advocate receiving Holy Communion in the mouth in the middle of a viral pandemic of this magnitude. Is this deemed to be another theological issue?

I believe our best solution is to individually and collectively to pray harder for an early medical resolution of the problem and in the meantime, look out for each other.

KEVIN CLARKE

London, England

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It will be hard enough to develop reasonable standards for communal worship before the development of a vaccine for the coronavirus.

But communion on the tongue? I quit as a communion distributor when I realized that this practice was becoming more common — even before the appearance of a lethal virus. It is impossible to distribute communion this way without saliva transfer.

As usual, American bishops don't seem to be thinking anything through at all.

JE JESIONOWSKI

Moravia, New York

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Public masses have started up here in southwest Florida and I am horrified to discover that communion on the tongue is forbidden. I could go on and on about the many ways Jesus is profaned when communion is given in the hand, however I will contain myself and ask one question - has canon law been suspended to make this denial valid?

I know God is pruning us, but this is one sacrifice I don't want to make unless it is God's will.

KAREN DAVIDIAN

Sarasota, Florida

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What we miss is not merely the Eucharist, but also being with the parish community. This plan in no way fills that need.

ROBERT MARZULLO

Shoreline, Washington

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After the virus, we keep talking about "getting back to normal" — to the way it was before. Well, what are we going back to in the church after the virus? To the same sexual abuse crisis and cover-up by bishops? To clericalism — the ordained are in control of everything, including the sacraments? To women being discriminated against at all levels in the church? To a denial of equality of baptismal rights and gifts? How about lack of accountability of finances? Are we continuing the selection of local bishops from among the "favorites" of the "big guys"? Are priests going to be stretched from responsibility for just three parishes to four or five parishes? To keep closing parishes for lack of celibate priests?

During this down time, the Spirit is knocking on our door. Now is the time for analysis and planning. Now is the time to consider:

- A U.S. Catholic Constitution promulgated and implemented, with rights and obligations identified
- Baptismal equality among the faithful, especially, in all the sacraments

- Diocesan organizational structure restructured to include a laity council and voting rights; equality with the priests' council
- Bishops selected in their own diocese by the priests and laity council
- Bishops resolve the sexual abuse crisis and all bishops who are compromised, resign or fired
- Clericalism finally put to bed. Seminaries restructured and of one mind — Vatican II
- Discrimination against women eliminated in all aspects
- Synods at all levels in the church regularly held and enforceable
- Local parish councils made mandatory and having organizational authority
- Local parishes cooperating on programs (environment, education, sports, the arts, liturgies, synods, etc.)

This should be the new normal for the church after the virus. We can't go back to the way we were before. We are hemorrhaging people, trust and spirit.

DENNIS KIRBY

Bloomington, Illinois

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Experts tell us opening up too soon may be a mistake we will regret. When it is relatively safe, naturally we will turn to the large number of Americans who lack meaningful employment. Do all have a right to meaningful employment? Does our common good have the task to find employment for those now unemployed?

Employment is the ordinary means to make a living, to have enough food and shelter for myself and my loved ones. Most of those now unemployed are such through no fault of their own. Besides basic necessities like clothing, those unemployed lack opportunity to use their creative instinct. Watching television has its limits for enjoyment. Do we have the obligation to find or create employment for those now unemployed?

In his inaugural speech in 1941 and 1944, President Franklin Roosevelt said employment is a human right. "Necessitous men are not free men."

All the major religions have endorsed the concept of human rights. But applying the principle to our present situation requires discernment, prudence and virtue. We are

called to earnest, persevering and continuous effort.

Help in furthering human rights and a just economy is found in *Principles for a Pluralist Commonwealth* by Gar Alperovitz. International structures that favor law over war are promoted by Citizens for Global Solutions.

When we start again, let's begin with law, peace and democracy.

(Fr.) BENJAMIN J. URMSTON, SJ

Clarkston, Michigan

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What part of this is a very infectious virus do these people not understand? How many medical professionals have to warn us that in an enclosed area the virus can travel up to 19 feet over time? Have these bishops not read about Holy Ghost parish in Texas?

Would a good shepherd lead his flock into danger? Ignoring the risks is one thing. Leading people into danger is a sin.

STEVE FILBERT

Wickenburg, Arizona

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Seems to me that those Catholics who insist on taking Communion on the tongue are directly rebuffing the Second Vatican Council guidelines for reception of the Eucharist. To minimize contagion in this time of COVID-19, I, as a nurse, believe that people who insist on reception of Communion on the tongue, should be denied that option during this pandemic.

Piety or whatever the reason for the old way to receive doesn't apply now.

PATRICIA SUCHAN

Wooster, Ohio

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I am glad some theologians at least have expressed concern about the suggestions for 10 congregant Masses. I realize that many bishops frequently celebrate the Eucharist in private chapels with a few intimates away from the distractions which daily life imposes on most of us.

But they and their friends really miss the whole point of the Eucharist. It is not a private ritual or personal prayer. The Eucharist is a community celebration of our response to Christ's sacrificial love for us and his gift of himself for us and to us in Communion. The bishop or priest merely presides at this celebration. Great if they seek time for personal prayer, either before or after that celebration. The Eucharist is Christ's gift to the church, the whole church, not just the hierarchy.

The New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan and President Donald Trump fiasco indicated the blindness of the episcopal staff to reality. This proposal of Masses for a select few congregants emphasizes the same myopic vision of these advisors. And it also points out again the problem of a church where power and influence are limited to a few select counselors.

BILL KEANE

Leesburg, Florida

Thank you, Fr. Kevin Mannara, for your article regarding the possible preference of implementing prayer services over livestream Masses during the COVID-19 pandemic. I could hardly believe my eyes as I read what you wrote of all that I had been thinking and feeling these past months.

I had not heard another person express my concern for the life of the liturgy, nor my personal feelings as I forced myself to "watch" Mass on Sunday and the holy days, with no sense of participation, despite answering the prayers and engaging myself as totally as possible, looking at a screen. Thank you for taking the time and effort to express your concern so well.

May your love of the Eucharist and the people of God find a hearing somewhere other than with this grateful Sister of St. Joseph.

(Sr.) JAMES XAVIER, SSJ

Neptune, New Jersey

I was so relieved to read this wonderful brief piece by Don Brophy. I have felt quite shy and even silenced myself as I have listened to so many others frequently appreciating how wonderful the "virtual Masses" are, streamed live into their homes, or retrievable at any convenient time.

True, I have benefitted from the ease of access to hearing the sacred scripture proclaimed well by trained and conscious readers, and wonderful homilies offered by priests who have actually prayed and prepared their remarks in a way that has nourished me, and in the case of the parish community that I have chosen to tune into fairly regularly, I have delighted in a smaller version of the choir providing exquisite musical accompaniment.

But I notice at the end, when we are provided with a screen with the words of a "spiritual communion prayer" — my chest grows tight, my heart is in my throat and the tears are spilling over my eyelids. No, this is not what will truly nourish me.

I don't know where we will find ourselves, but I am hoping that many of us will soon find ourselves returning to the catacombs and celebrating Eucharist together, in the flesh, in small groups of relationship and physical presence, like the first Christians.

Yes, this pandemic has changed everything. May we have the courage to see what new freedom it is offering us.

JULIE MURRAY

Cincinnati, Ohio

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