News
Opinion

Two women walking down church aisle with long handled collection baskets

Women at St. James Church in Louisville, Kentucky, pass collection baskets during Easter Mass April 4, 2021, amid the coronavirus pandemic. (CNS/Reuters/Amira Karaoud)



by Heidi Schlumpf

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Like the millions of Americans who have received their coronavirus vaccine shots, I've started thinking about what I will do once I'm fully vaccinated. At the top of my list: a trip to the dentist to repair a tooth that broke months ago.

Getting a professional haircut, seeing friends and family, or traveling by airplane are frequently mentioned by others finally freed from more than a year of lockdown. And, for some, it means a return to in-person church and receiving Communion — that is, if you weren't already taking the risk to do so.

On Easter Sunday, our not-fully-vaccinated family livestreamed our parish Mass onto the living room TV. The just-opened packages of Peeps added to the festivity, but it was hard to truly celebrate the joy of the Resurrection while still quarantined in our home. So, after I get that tooth fixed (or maybe even before), I'll be grateful to

attend an in-person Mass and receive Communion.

But as I talk to friends, family and colleagues about what parish life will look like after coronavirus, a consensus is emerging that "they're not coming back"— or at least not in the numbers before the pandemic. And the numbers before the pandemic were already in free fall.

Just before Easter, Gallup Poll released survey results that showed that — for the first time since this polling started in 1937 — Americans who belong to a formal religious institution are in the minority. Only 47% of those polled said they belonged to a church, synagogue or mosque, compared to roughly 70% during the last six decades.

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Most of the decline has happened since 2000, and the decrease has been steeper for Catholics than for Protestants. The number of Catholics belonging to a parish dropped from 76% in 2000 to 58% in 2020. Of course, these trends reflect similar drop-offs in other memberships and a general loss of trust in institutions.

But combine that with the rise of the "nones," and it does not bode well for a return to traditional parish involvement post-COVID-19. Dioceses and archdioceses that were closing or consolidating parishes not only continued, but in some cases accelerated, their processes during the pandemic.

Historians undoubtedly will look back and see this pandemic as a precipitating factor in massive societal change. Experts already predict that work and office life will be radically different, that the pandemic is reshaping education at all levels, and that shopping, communication and socializing habits acquired during lockdown may persist.

I am smart enough not to try to guess what that will look like for religious institutions. But I think that the "absence makes the heart grow fonder" folks who optimistically anticipate a spike in Mass attendance and in other involvement in parish life after the pandemic are naïve. I hope I am wrong.

But if you felt like you didn't miss much after taking a pandemic-imposed yearlong break from Mass attendance, you're probably less likely to make the effort to return

with any regularity. The extra sleep on a Sunday morning may be more attractive than attending a service that does little to stir your soul. And the unofficial alignment of too many pastors with the Republican Party during the last presidential campaign and election was a definite turn-off for many. That may be exacerbated if the majority of folks who return are more conservative.

As Franciscan Fr. Daniel P. Horan says in the latest Francis Effect podcast, church leaders often ask the wrong question when they try to figure out this problem. Instead of asking, "What's wrong with them?" we should be asking, "What's wrong with us?"

Jesus' message of love and redemption shouldn't be a tough sell, but it is mediated through human institutions, which have renewed themselves during other seismic societal shifts throughout history. I'm trusting the Holy Spirit has some renewal in store for us after this pandemic, if only we will listen to Her.

Rachel Malak is a recent graduate of Fordham University working in public relations and living with her family during the pandemic. She is also a Catholic and has a podcast called h.e.r.LIFE that explores "twenty-something life."

Last month, after reading my column about "Liberal Catholicism: We've been here all along," Malak asked me to be a guest on her podcast. Before agreeing, I listened to a few episodes, my favorite being "Sex, Drugs & Church Songs," in which she and a friend rate what they like and don't like about how guys act in church. Among the turn-offs: not folding hands on the way to Communion, not genuflecting, leaving before the recessional hymn.

After last summer's explosion of social and racial justice movements, she was shocked to discover that much of the conservative pushback to those movements came from her church. "An identity that I used to celebrate and be really proud of and a community I was happy to be a part of was now … refusing in a lot of ways to recognize their privilege," she said. "That was something I wasn't really OK being a part of."

She was happy to discover that there are other progressive Catholics out there. If you'd like to hear our conversation, check out her "Liberal Catholic Easter Episode" here.

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