

A woman receives Communion during a memorial Mass for Fr. Jorge Ortiz-Garay at St. Brigid Church in Brooklyn, New York, March 27, on the first anniversary of the priest's death from COVID-19. Ortiz-Garay, who was pastor of St. Brigid, is recognized as the first Catholic priest in the U.S. to succumb to the coronavirus. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

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If the signs of these current times were a billboard, I'm pretty sure they would say, in glaring neon, that no one is an island. Ironically, while siloed in our individual homes and small communities this past year and a half, the world itself has shown, in fearsome and apocalyptic ways, our fundamental interconnectedness. Any small individual action this past year — a trip to a store, a night out, a knock on a friend's door, a morning commute — has carried with it a sea of ethical ruminations about its social consequences.

Now, with the COVID-19 vaccine widely available across the United States and the Delta variant surging, individual vaccinations won't suffice — ending the pandemic depends on collective inoculation.

Meanwhile, the Earth has made its own loud and bloody protests. Wildfires have again ravaged the western half of North America, their smoke found as far away as Siberia, which has even larger wildfires of its own.

Last week, too, the now-infamous latest report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change announced dire predictions for the global climate, finding 2 degrees Celsius of warming nearly inevitable and stressing the need for drastic changes in global emissions to curb even the worst effects of our planetary disaster.

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Surely other epochs have confronted population-wide challenges, but right now these signs of the times feel pressing and singular, at least to me. They reveal that individual decisions affect multitudes, and any effective solution requires the collaboration of the multitudes.

Lately, the common good is no abstract concept; it reveals itself everywhere as central to our very survival as a species and welfare as a global society. Yet in the midst of this obvious truth, we find ourselves stuck in a society where individual choices are rewarded and accumulation of wealth is the ultimate virtue. It is a story

told through rising hospitalization numbers and smoke, the daily tension between the demands of the Earth and the seeming lethargy of our society.

In the story of democracy, this predicament I'm describing is the tension between individual freedom and civic duty, a subject that has inspired countless debates and op-eds. From the standpoint of faith, this predicament has a different ring; it's the challenge of Communion.

Communion is the regular reminder that the whole universe is, ultimately, one in Christ. In the transformation of the bread is the recognition that our broken world is a sacred gift, and it is our collective duty to tend it together.

Communion destroys the illusion of separateness through love, not illness or smoke. It calls us to the promise of the kingdom of God here.

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The Catholic Eucharist is a profound act of hope that makes the impossible possible. It is a miracle on Earth, the transformation of bread into the body of Christ, uniting more than 1 billion people in an unlikely supper.

In the midst of this miraculous moment, we have been inundated by the impossible: the seeming impossibility of ending the coronavirus, the inertia of global action on climate, the sinking suspicion that we don't have enough collective will to save our common home. It is therefore an act of collective faith to maintain the will and vision to heal the world.

But you can't will people into this collective realization any more than you can will people to care about others or to fret about carbon. Acting collectively requires individual freedom — and there again we see the challenge and the promise of democracy. So how do we make collective change happen without full cooperation?

I've had my fair share of frustrations with vaccine resistance and climate change denial, but ultimately, I have realized I need to let it go. The bitterness eats at me, and it dulls my senses and depletes my reserves of compassion. It doesn't activate me to fix or help so much as give me a sense of vague superiority and passivity, the opposite of what the world needs.

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The solution, then, must be action that builds community. When individual actions are not enough, we must join with others in living out the call of Communion in the world to make the impossible possible. When faced with death, Jesus broke bread and poured wine. Days later, in the breaking of the bread — an act of community and nourishment — two disciples found that Jesus had done the impossible: He had defied death.

It's not a time to be brave or tough or even angry; it's a time to be hopeful and joyful, a time to turn toward one another, a time to invite each other to work together, to live into Communion and work miracles together.

The miracles we must work might be medical in the form of joining public health campaigns, or political, in the form of grassroots mobilization. They might involve supporting local or nationwide climate change lobbying or writing letters about issues of pressing importance. They might simply involve having the conversations that we've been putting off with people we find difficult, finally making the room to extend an invitation built of patience and joy. They might involve community gardens or town hall meetings or simply joining an effort we've put off joining.

What we all know, though, is that we need these miracles, and we need them now. The strength of the collective, of making decisions with and on behalf of others and not simply ourselves, is the cure we need for the ills of today.

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