Opinion
NCR Voices
Bishop Edward B. Scharfenberger of Albany, N.Y., sprinkles ashes on parishioners.

Bishop Edward B. Scharfenberger of Albany, N.Y., sprinkles ashes on parishioners during Mass at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception Feb. 17, 2021, amid the coronavirus pandemic. (CNS/The Evangelist/Cindy Schultz)



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The comedian John Mulaney has a bit where he talks about going to Mass on Christmas Eve with his parents and says he was "batting like 400" with his responses even though he had stopped going to church.

But when it came to the Sign of Peace, all bets were off. He said he was "like the one pre-Y2K [ahem, person] going 'and also with you'" while the rest of the congregation said "and with your Spirit."

"They changed [the wording] because that's what needed revamping in the Catholic Church," he riffs. "That was the squeaky wheel that needed the grease."

I thought about that at Christmas Eve Mass this year, where there was also a discrepancy at the Sign of Peace — not with the words so much (although you can still hear some saying the old refrain) — but in the confusion of how to greet people.

Since COVID-19, my parish — where everyone used to hold hands during the "Our Father" — has picked up a habit other parishes are doing as well: where Mass-goers nod, smile and wave during the Sign of Peace. Hugs and handshakes with strangers are a thing of the past.

But on Christmas Eve, those who had been away for a while and not familiar with the unspoken way things are now, reached out with a ready hand to those around them, while the regulars, now accustomed to holding back, seemed to pause before extending their hands in return so as not to seem unwelcoming.

Now, at the five-year anniversary of the COVID-19 pandemic — officially declared in the U.S. on March 11, 2020 — we have in many ways returned to normal life. This goes for the Catholic Church as well, which according to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, is back to its pre-pandemic numbers for Sunday Masses.

So the typical percentage, about a quarter of U.S. Catholics, are back to church, but they might be doing things differently as a precaution against spreading germs. Not only are some church-goers not shaking hands, but they are also not likely receiving consecrated wine from the chalice.

- Sister Margaret Kavanagh of the Sisters of St. Dominic of Amityville, N.Y.N.Y.

  Sister Margaret Kavanagh of the Sisters of St. Dominic of Amityville, N.Y., exchanges the sign of peace with other nuns. For many, hugs and handshakes with strangers are a thing of the past. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)

- Empty holy water font in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican.

  One of several empty holy water fonts in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican in this file photo dated March 4, 2020. During the Covid pandemic, churches around the world adopted measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. (OSV News/ CNS/Junno Arocho Esteves)

- Pope Francis walks across an empty St. Peter's Square at the Vatican March 27, 2020.

  Pope Francis walks across an empty St. Peter's Square at the Vatican on March 27, 2020, for a prayer service that was livestreamed across the world in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. (CNS/Vatican Media)

- Motorist glances at a monstrance during a drive-thru blessing service.

  A motorist glances at a monstrance containing the Eucharist during a drive-thru blessing service marking Divine Mercy Sunday, April 19, 2020, at St. John of God Church in Central Islip, N.Y. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

- Health guidelines on preventing the spread of COVID-19.

  Health guidelines on preventing the spread of COVID-19 and a hand-sanitizer dispenser are seen near an entrance to Immaculate Conception Church in Jamaica Estates, N.Y., Nov. 22, 2020. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

A study last year by the Washington-based Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions found that of the 99 responding dioceses — about half of the nation's total — 50 were offering the Communion chalice, 47 left it up to individual pastors, and two dioceses were not doing it at all.

Holy water fonts, not used during COVID-19, may have come back. The one at our parish is back in use, but even in pre-pandemic days, I had been leery about putting my hand in there.

Still, I think it would be a shame if our pandemic takeaways at church were just that: things taken away due to concerns about germs.

We'd be remiss to forget — and maybe should tap into — just how creative so many parishes, schools and religious orders were during the pandemic with livestreaming Masses and classroom sessions, offering drive-thru blessings, confessions and fish fries, plus using ubiquitous Zoom meetings to welcome newcomers to a vocation.

We also should remember the bravery demonstrated by those in the medical profession and the compassion and care shown by health care chaplains, teachers and many of the rest of us amid trying to figure out how to function and help each other out in a changed world.

And now, while Pope Francis suffers his own health battle, I think it's fitting to look back five years ago and recall the image of him on March 27 praying alone in the rain-drenched St. Peter's Square for an end to the pandemic. Those words he spoke – when much of the world was living in fear – bring us back to that moment.

He calmly reassured the world that "in the midst of our tempest," God "invites us to reawaken and put into practice that solidarity and hope capable of giving strength, support and meaning to these hours when everything seems to be floundering."

That day, his Urbi et Orbi message (to the city and the world) was both a blessing and words of advice for a way forward. He stressed an early pandemic lesson that should still hold true in healthier times, saying we should find "courage to create spaces where everyone can recognize that they are called, and to allow new forms of hospitality, fraternity and solidarity."

In other words, the pope seemed to be saying: Let us offer each other a sign of peace.

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