

Coronavirus, the Cup, and Cancellations

Some eucharistic challenges and graces of the present moment

By Fr. John Christman, SSS

Things are moving so rapidly it's difficult to get some perspective. In a span of a little over two weeks, we've gone from praying for people elsewhere in the world suffering from the coronavirus to cancelling Masses in our own dioceses for the foreseeable future. One minute we're rewriting our prayers of the faithful to include healing, the next we're telling people not to come to Mass. It has been a whirlwind, and it's not over. In fact, it's difficult to even write about the experience in the midst of it because by the time it's published a new set of circumstances emerges that deprioritize previous concerns. But that doesn't mean that they weren't important.

So how do we speak in this time? And more significantly, how do we remain true to our fundamental Christian values and beliefs when the ground is constantly moving beneath our feet? We know God offers grace and mercy abundantly at all times, if we are open to seeing and receiving it. What eucharistic challenges and corresponding graces might we see amidst the whirlwind of the present moment?

Solidarity.

Solidarity may not be a term we Americans use much, but it is a thoroughly Catholic concept. I recall a presentation by a renowned Catholic ethicist where he listed key Catholic ethical virtues and solidarity was among them. It struck me at the time, because it was clear that the word was not part of my ethical vocabulary. But from Pope John Paul II to Pope Francis it is clear that solidarity, especially with those most in need, is essentially Catholic. Thus, when we first began to hear of the coronavirus outbreak in China, the grace of the moment was to respond in solidarity. Not only were we called to pray for those affected, but to realize that they are no different than us. It could just as easily be us... and soon was.

As Adam Gopnik astutely pointed out in a recent article in *The New Yorker*, people are victims of *an amoral virus*. Moreover, he encouraged us to avoid all tendencies to "other" the virus, attributing it to another country or people. For us, as Catholics, this is all the more true. We are all made in the image and likeness of God and are equal in dignity before God. To see someone either on the other side of the world or on the other side of the quarantine as my neighbor is our challenge and our grace. This moment calls us to greater solidarity.

The Cup.

Shortly after the coronavirus began to be diagnosed in more than one part of the country, some dioceses sent out directives to their parishes to no longer offer the Precious Blood to their congregations. This was a liturgical hornet's nest if ever there was one. It stirred up all of the familiar polemics about offering the precious

blood to the people. In years past, I've stood dumbfounded at Masses to witness pastors proclaim the words of institution over the wine, Jesus' words, "Take this all of you and drink from it" only to have those same pastors not even offer the People of God the choice to "take and drink." Sometimes this would be explained by the teaching on concomitance, that where Christ's Eucharistic body is present, the whole Christ is present: body, blood, soul and divinity. However, as a theologian I respect once retorted, "That may be good dogmatic theology, but it's not good liturgical theology."

More concerning for me in the moment that the decision was made to no longer offer the cup was the question, "As we stop offering the Precious Blood now... will those priests who are disinclined to offer the Precious Blood to the people ever share it again in the future?" Likewise, when catechesis on receiving from the cup is so sparse, will people choose to receive from the cup once the coronavirus pandemic is past? Those are very real challenges and we can't let them fade from mind, lest we lose something essential to our faith.

But there is also a grace. And the grace, as it so often does, comes from the example of Jesus. Jesus always sought out the marginalized and the most vulnerable. He was a life-giving presence to those most in need. We recall this in John's gospel when Jesus says, "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly (Jn 10:10)."

Receiving the Body *and* Blood of Christ at Mass is life-giving nourishment for us all. However, in this time where no vaccine is currently available for the coronavirus pandemic, large numbers of people untested, and many of our older parishioners and people at risk with pre-existing medical conditions are particularly vulnerable... in this moment, the grace, the abundant life we share in Jesus' name, is to together fast from the precious blood... for a time. We fast from the Precious Blood for the life of the community.

Cancellations.

There's a great deal of anxiety and fear concerning COVID-19. There's social distancing, panic shopping, travel bans, cancellations of large gatherings, and more. With no anti-virus vaccine currently available, a primary concern is overwhelming medical facilities that have limited resources. Likewise, we are flooded with information, some of it scientifically sound, some more suspect. People are anxious and afraid.

Meanwhile, churches around the country are dealing with this unfolding reality in a number of different ways. Some Catholic dioceses are removing obligations to attend Sunday Mass, yet still offering Mass for those who choose to attend. Other dioceses are canceling Masses entirely for the upcoming weeks. This may have seemed unfathomable a month ago, but again, the value is protecting life, especially the most vulnerable. What are the challenges and graces here?

I often recall Karl Rahner's poignant phrase, "The Christian of the future will either be a mystic or will not exist at all." Karl Rahner died 36 years ago, so we are well into the future he contemplated, and his call to be "a mystic" might be more important now than he ever imagined. Being a Christian "mystic" in this sense simply means to have a real and profound personal relationship with God. This is essential, especially during this national emergency.

When we cannot attend Mass, or choose to do so for the sake of others, we need a deep abiding relationship with the God of life. We need this relationship with God to help calm our fears and ease our anxieties. We also need this life-giving relationship with God to keep us from turning in upon ourselves. This is a tremendous challenge. Not attending Mass can sometimes lead to not keeping the Sabbath day holy. Thus, we have to consciously choose to continue to pray, reflect upon the word of God, and nurture that deep abiding relationship with God.

However, that's not the only challenge, because as we all know we Americans struggle with individualism. We as Americans are fiercely individualistic. There are good qualities associated with this, like self-assurance, personal responsibility, and more. However, we are all too familiar with the negative aspects of individualism, such as selfishness, greed, disregard for others, and so on. The negative tendencies can be greatly exacerbated by social distancing. We can become myopic and focused in completely upon ourselves. We've all likely seen examples of panic buying. We must remember as we responsibly physically distance ourselves, that we should not spiritually distance ourselves.

Catholicism is inherently communal. We are members of the Body of Christ. What affects one of us, affects all of us. This is so fundamental to our Christian identity that we even refer to Eucharist as "Communion." So, the grace of this moment may be the call to build communion even though we can't physically gather together. How do we do this?

Here's a place where technology may be very helpful. Many parishes and dioceses are now live-streaming their Sunday Masses. You can still "be in communion" with your local parish community or diocese by praying when they pray. To make the connection deeper, you can start or partake in parish virtual prayer groups, or virtual scripture studies. Consider also just simply reaching out to your fellow parishioners, via email or phone call, to connect and support each other. Be creative and think of ways in which you can build up your community. We have *received "communion"* at every Mass we have attended, and we have been sent forth to *be communion*. The grace of this moment is to be communion in new ways.

The Holy Spirit will no doubt inspire many new and creative life-giving ways to be communion in this difficult time. Then, once this time passes, our communion will be all the more meaningful when we gather together again around the Lord's table. Not only will we have a deeper relationship with God, but we will also have a deeper relationship with each other, a mystic communion.