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+ Brendan Leahy

Ten Covid-19 “Outcomes” for the Church

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TS Eliot’s line about having the *experience* but missing the *meaning* is a spur to us to not let the Covid-19 experience pass us by in vain. What is it saying to us? In what direction is it pointing us? Can we name what we’ll take away with us from this time?

Each of us will answer that at different levels. A picture-cartoon sent to me recently reminded me of this. It showed a dog with some mud half-way up his feet but another dog alongside him up to his neck in mud and the line said: “How deep is the mud? All depends on who you ask. We all go through the same stuff differently”.

On a personal level, it’s been a weird time for Bishops and priests. It’s as if someone suddenly put the brakes on and we’ve had to cope with the sudden jerk. All kinds of emotions and reactions have emerged in us. In a webinar Sr. Maryanne Loughry has explored the issues that have arisen on the personal level: stress and worry, hyper vigilance and particularly a sense of grieving with the sudden loss of so much that was part and parcel of everyday Church life.¹ She maintains Church personnel too experience symptoms of the collective grief going on in society at large with normal life so disrupted. And there are several stages of grief, not all in a nice neat order.

There is value in naming and recognising what we are going through on a personal level. In Limerick Diocese, just before the Covid-19 virus hit, we had a clergy conference with a question that had prompted good engagement: “who are you when you are not *doing* your job?”. Little did we think it was preparing us for what was coming just a few weeks later. The more personal analysis of the impact of the virus crisis on priests is an exploration that is being taken up by Fr. Hugh Lagan SMA.

In this short article, however, my focus is different. I want simply to suggest *ten* possible “outcomes” from the experience of

1 See Maryanne Loughry RSM, “Covid-19: How to face the Social and Personal Grief”. International Union Superiors General webinar, 21 April 2020

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THE FURROW

these months. I offer it as a kind of memo of the experience, what is it we are learning or being reminded of. Each point is briefly stated, it would require teasing out but that's for another day.

The Church is not the building or simply an institution. This sounds obvious but so often when the word “church” is used, the building or organisational institution is what comes spontaneously to mind for many. Suddenly, with the virus in some cases the buildings were closed but everywhere the organisational structures severely curtailed. And yet the Church remained alive. We were being reminded the Church is the People. We remember that in Irish the church building is referred to as “teach an Phobail” (the People’s house). The Church is a People and this, as we know, is a theme underlined by the Second Vatican Council. In our Irish history, we know many episodes of institutional collapse but the People still managed to communicate the Faith.

The sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation are like an “Operating System” that is always active. We only get baptised once. We only get confirmed once. And there is a reason for that. When we are baptised, we become a new creation, children of God. The Spirit is poured into us. In Confirmation, we are strengthened for mission with a new outpouring of the Spirit. With the normal attendance at Mass interrupted and reception of the Eucharist gone, the Covid-19 crisis brought a new recognition that the basic “operating system” that makes us Christians continues to be operative. We have witnessed in these months many baptised faithful, maybe many who don’t go regularly to Mass, living selflessly and generously in the weeks and months of the crisis. This has reminded me of Pope Francis’ striking comment in *Evangelii Gaudium*: “Seeing reality with the eyes of faith, we cannot fail to acknowledge what the Holy Spirit is sowing. It would show a lack of trust in his free and unstinting activity to think that authentic Christian values are absent where great numbers of people have received baptism and express their faith and solidarity with others in a variety of ways.” (n. 68). We need to recognise Baptism as the fundamental sacrament. It gives us our Christian vocation. Each of us individually and together exercise our baptismal priesthood day by day in all the bits and pieces of life (see *Lumen Gentium*, 11).

The Family is Church, the Domestic Church. With no public celebration of the Mass, sacraments of First Communion and Confirmation postponed, and even pastoral visits to the sick and dying curtailed, we all have to admit we have never experienced anything like it. Enter another humorous cartoon. It depicts God

TEN COVID-19 “OUTCOMES” FOR THE CHURCH

talking to the ‘enemy.’ The Devil is saying, “With Covid-19 I have closed your churches,” and with God answering, “On the contrary, I have opened a church in each house.”

There has been a new discovery of the family as the Domestic church. We have heard of whole families coming together, in a way they haven’t for years, to participate in Mass being transmitted on Television or online in one way or another. People have gone looking up online how to pray the Rosary as they wanted to do so with loved ones who were dying, or in their homes or mortuaries alongside the deceased. We certainly value our Church buildings for prayer but prayer can happen around a table or sitting together in a sitting room or privately on our own. Some families set up small sacred spaces in their homes. I received a letter from a family saying they had talked about things of faith in a way they never seemed to have had time for before.

Here too we can mention the sacrament of marriage. It too keeps on working. Because of the Holy Spirit’s activity, the family can be a house of Nazareth where Jesus is present as we love one another. The Church isn’t just prayers and ritual. It is life in all its aspects. Families have learned to be creative in caring for one another from cooking to entertainment, from finance to education, from sport to communication. We’ve learned to appreciate nature more. All of this is an experience of Church in a full sense, the “spiritual worship” of which Rom 12 speaks. Is this all too ideal? Of course, it might seem so but in its official teaching, the Church actually proclaims this. We all know there’s no such thing as a perfect family. That’s not the point. What is at stake is that we realise just what a great thing the family can be – it is called to be the Home (Domestic) Church. And just as there are varieties of church buildings, colours, styles and paintings, each family will be different, but nonetheless each family can be Church. In families in these weeks, we have listened to the Word of God that each member is!

Difficulties can be teaching moments. Faced with a crisis, certain basics of the Christian faith get recalled. We’ve noticed that in recent months. The notion of spiritual communion gained new traction. I appreciate that from a purist liturgical point of view, the practice of spiritual communion has its limits. The specific prayer formula often used harks back to St. Alphonsus of the nineteenth century trying to help people make up for a lack of regular reception of communion. Nevertheless, it is good to be reminded that there are circumstances when we are far from a church or unable to receive the Eucharist but we are spiritually linked to Christ and one another, and can make an act of spiritual communion.

Another area was the Church's teaching on Confession. At his morning Mass on Marcy 20th, Pope Francis spoke about this doctrine in words that reminded people of the merciful interpretation of the Church's norms. He commented: "I know that many of you go to confession before Easter ... Many will say to me: 'But Father ... I can't leave the house and I want to make my peace with the Lord. I want Him to embrace me ... How can I do that unless I find a priest?'. Do what the catechism says. It's very clear. If you can't find a priest to go to confession, speak to God. He's your Father. Tell Him the truth: 'Lord. I did this and this and this. Pardon me.' Ask His forgiveness with all your heart with an act of contrition, and promise Him, 'afterward I will go to confession.' You will return to God's grace immediately. You yourself can draw near, as the catechism teaches us, to God's forgiveness, without having a priest at hand."

The notions of solidarity and subsidiarity so central in the Church's social doctrine have also been clearly in evidence. The language of solidarity was used a lot. At one point, the European Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen, a Catholic, said Europe had become "the world's beating heart of solidarity" in the coronavirus crisis that will likely redefine "our politics, our geopolitics and possibly globalization itself". In terms of subsidiarity, we saw many family and local neighbourhood initiatives and community projects. In Limerick, for instance, we saw Limerick City and County Council, in association with An Garda Síochána, Limerick GAA, HSE, Munster Rugby, FAI, the Catholic and Church of Ireland Dioceses as well as various religious orders and multiple sporting and volunteer groups, come together in a coordinated response to assist the vulnerable and elderly across Limerick City & County in this time of need. As well as the high level state input, a healthy society is always going to need to local, more immediate, subsidiary levels of participation.

Likewise, the Church's language around "the dignity of life" and the "common good" were echoed in many ways. The Coronavirus certainly brought up the priority of priorities: life. And that life has a dignity right to the end. And in order to do our part, we need to be mindful of the common good.

A new Alertness to Care of our Common Home. The Virus has brought the environment agenda to the fore. Pope Francis' line in *Laudato Si'*, whose fifth anniversary occurs this year, certainly rang through: everything is interconnected. Human fragility and the woundedness of our planet have revealed a great poverty that calls for humility, care and co-operation. Linked with this was a new global consciousness. None of us (individuals, states, churches)

TEN COVID-19 “OUTCOMES” FOR THE CHURCH

can resolve issues on our own. We need to work together. We always need to expand our horizons.

Technology is a must. At the Limerick Synod in 2016, I was surprised how often delegates who weren't all that young kept mentioning the need to use technology more in communicating the message – and what was intended ranged from projecting the words of hymns on the wall/screen during liturgies to a lively parish website to modern means of catechesis and engagement with young people. I've often remarked that I took this as a voice of God. The current crisis has done much to really alert us to the significance of the social means of communication. I appreciate there will be a lot of discernment afterwards on what is best practice etc., but we have certainly learned we cannot ignore it. The use of social media is a new way to be 'ecclesia', a continent most of us have only entered. Priests have commented on how much feedback they have received through text messages etc. in a way they wouldn't have before. And, of course, we are beginning to recognise the funding stream will increasingly be flowing through on-line methods of donation.

We've learned technology is a “must” and yet we've also realised the value of real time personal encounter in community as the living space for sacraments. In a morning homily on April 17, Pope Francis commented on how the on-line transmission of liturgy has been an expression of the church in a difficult situation that the Lord has allowed, “but the ideal of the church is always with the people and with the sacraments – always.” For Pope Francis our relationship with Jesus “is intimate, it is personal, but it is within a community.” He added that a personalised, familiar relationship with Christ “without the Church, without the people, without the sacraments, is dangerous”.

Priests and Lay Faithful are very much bound together. Archbishop Eamon Martin commented on how the Covid-19 crisis “has forced us all to stay apart and it has prevented us from doing a lot of the things we love to do as priests and as bishops – to walk with our people, to accompany them in the happy days and in the sad days of their lives. It has destroyed our opportunity to gather our people – the church is about gathering. Ecclesia: the whole meaning of church is about gathering people together.” The virus crisis has brought with it a recognition that a priest is essentially a man of dialogue, of deep relationships, of communion. It's what gives him energy and life. His identity is relational. Pope Francis talks about “closeness”. Priests are ordained to be close to God, to each other, to their Bishop and to all the faithful they serve. And

THE FURROW

people desire this contact with priests. Many have kept in contact informally and then more formally through the transmission of liturgies. While these weeks have seen many activities decrease, we've seen a new vibrancy in people making contact with each other at all levels. Relationships are at the heart of what the Church is about.

There's more than One Table; There's more than one Presence of Jesus. These weeks and months have been for many a Eucharistic fast. And it has been painful. But it has been a time to begin to recognise that at Mass we sit at two tables – the table of the Eucharist and the table of the Word. Indeed, in recent years, Church documents speak of the many “presences” of Jesus.

I know of priests who have managed to continue *lectio divina* groups via zoom conference or by e-mail contact. Others were receiving and transmitting daily Scripture reflections. Perhaps there is more we could be doing here in terms of promoting the discovery of the presence of Jesus in the Word.

But also the other “presences” of Jesus. These weeks have provided many testimonies of service of Jesus present in our neighbours whether it be doing shopping for those cocooning, or working in ICU to attend to those struggling with the virus. Indeed, these weeks have been an opening of our eyes to the presence of Jesus in so many whose “ordinary” service we have taken for granted – cleaners, truck drivers, shop assistants, carers.

Parish Structures are not set in stone. With over 70s cocooning we were given a glimpse at where we'll be in five years' time. It's been something of an alarm bell indicating the need to take the steps to shape units that are sustainable and liveable for priests and lay faithful. And the Covid-19 crisis has opened up flexibility – priests celebrated funerals in neighbouring parishes, people tuned into Masses in different parishes. When we return to “normality”, certainly the local community can still have its spiritual, prayer identity but the overall structure of parishes needs change. These weeks have given us a sort of permission to really begin in earnest to move on this.

Discovering the “Sacrament” of Jesus among Us. The big “absence” for so many during these weeks is the Eucharist. We know the Eucharist makes the Church and the Church makes the Eucharist. Of course, we remember that for centuries Catholics received communion often just once a year. But in recent times frequent reception is more common. So it hurts not to get to Mass and be nourished on the Bread from Heaven. Perhaps absence will make the heart grow even fonder of this gift.

TEN COVID-19 “OUTCOMES” FOR THE CHURCH

But perhaps there is something else. Thérèse of Lisieux spoke about Jesus wanting to exit the Tabernacle. While the Eucharist is indeed the source and summit of Christian life, there is a risk that we have limited our understanding of that simply to the ritual of the Mass and reception of the sacrament, whereas the sacrament propels us out to be the “sacrament” of Jesus among us in the world around us. We recall Mt 18:20: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

The Covid-19 crisis has been one great invitation to discover this “sacrament”. In 1960 Chiara Lubich, probably at that time with Communism in the background, wrote: “Even if all the churches are closed, who is able to destroy the living temple of God who is Jesus in our Midst. And even if the sacraments are prohibited, who can stop us from quenching our thirst at the fountain of living water, which is charity in our midst, which is Christ in our Midst”. Yes, the presence of Jesus among two or more gathered in his name, in love of neighbour, is something of a sacrament. Perhaps it is particularly the “sacrament” of the laity, that presence of Jesus among people out and about in their daily lives, building up the world of fraternal relationships, the Church serving humanity.

CONCLUSION

In her webinar Sr. Maryanne Loughry noted how our impact with the Coronavirus started in Lent and our reflection on it has continued during the Easter season. She quotes words from the prophet Hosea. It is fitting to conclude with them as they express our experience – a “tearing down”, a “dying”, yes, but one that contains seeds of the Resurrection, his “appearing”, and outpouring of the Spirit:

‘Come, let us return to the LORD;
for it is he who has torn, and he will heal us;
he has struck down, and he will bind us up.
After two days he will revive us;
on the third day he will raise us up,
that we may live before him.
Let us know, let us press on to know the LORD;
his appearing is as sure as the dawn;
he will come to us like the showers,
like the spring rains that water the earth.’