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Fidei* and the
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of opportunity

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17 February 2021, Ash Wednesday ... ‘there is a continuous stream of people going in and out of our church’, a priest friend rang to tell me. He was delighted. I went to my local church, and there was a scattering of people, lighting candles, praying and collecting a little sachet of ashes, to bless themselves with, to bring home. And not all were old. The building felt ‘alive’. It was an Ash Wednesday like no other, with no communal service. But people remembered, they felt the need to come to a sacred place.

Sacred space, sacred place – a place where you can light a candle, collect blessed Ashes, kneel and pray. A place that “feels” holy. It is remarkable that people continue to visit churches, to visit a building. For many it provides a great respite from the ascetic demands of Covid, for some a break from a loneliness that can accompany isolation.

The work that is done to ensure these places, our churches, are kept open, and are places of welcome, of beauty, and of quiet, is to be applauded. The Church is alive. Indeed, while the Covid pandemic is undeniably dreadful, a cause of loss of life and great suffering, of months of restrictions to our usual freedoms, the exercise of the *sensus fidei* is instructive. It is our Church. It is alive and we wish to keep it so.

Covid has taught us the importance of our local church, to some simply a building, but to many of us our local building is so much more.

We haven’t been able to gather as community for months; it is now a year since restrictions were first imposed ... and while our Archbishops have rightly asked that consideration might be given to some form of communal celebrations for Easter ceremonies (2021) we cannot be too hopeful.

And yet, many watch mass regularly on RTE, participating as

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best they can. Every weekday, since March last, RTE's News Now channel has broadcast mass at 10.30am from St Eunan's and St Columba's Cathedral, Letterkenny. This daily broadcast has an average audience of 34,600, according to figures released last April. RTE, and in particular their Head of Religious Content, Roger Childs are to be thanked for this initiative which unites so many people throughout the country, helping to nourish their faith at this difficult time. The Bishop of Raphoe, Alan McGuckian, has accurately noted that the broadcast is uniting many viewers in faith.

Many, very many others, more adept with Wifi, tune in online to their own local church, or 'travel' to mass somewhere else in the country, or indeed in the world.

The *sensus fidei* knows we need the prayer of the Eucharist. The Church makes the Eucharist, the Eucharist makes the Church.

Perhaps the most moving image for a Catholic during this COVID-19 pandemic, this time of 'virtual' liturgy, is that of Pope Francis, alone in Saint Peter's Square, on a wet, dark, miserable Good Friday 2020. The Pope's empathy was palpable: "Thick darkness has gathered over our squares, our streets and our cities; it has taken over our lives, filling everything with a deafening silence and a distressing void, that stops everything as it passes by ... We find ourselves afraid and lost."

The "*Urbi et Orbi*" blessing was given from the steps of the basilica to an empty square, his words and actions reverberated throughout the world.

At this 'global' liturgy the Pope invited the world to see lockdown, pandemic, as a time for people to focus on the important, "a time", he said, "*to separate what is necessary from what is not.*"

These are good words to contemplate with seriousness as we think of our Church in Ireland. The lockdown has shown in many ways the strength of people's faith, the need for prayer, for our local church building, for candles, for online liturgies. A time *to separate what is necessary from what is not* – all these seem necessary.

EUCCHARIST

The 'pandemic' of online and televised masses also challenge us to think of what is necessary when it comes to the mass, to Eucharist. How does 'virtual' communion, what we are terming 'spiritual' communion, nourish us? I think of an old friend I know in a Nursing Home. They have all been vaccinated now and have daily mass. Fortunately, there are a number of retired priests in the Nursing Home. My friend chose not to go to mass recently. Why? 'It's not mass'. It took me a while to work out the problem:

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the presider receives communion, the other priests present receive also – but no one else. Who has made this decision is uncertain – it is unlikely to have been the elderly priests - and it is hard to see it as a medical decision, as a Covid safeguard. Some do receive, but not all. It seems rather to be a throwback to an old, one might say sterile form of Catholicism, a clericalism of some laity, whoever makes the decisions in the Home, who see the Church not as People of God, but more as a hierarchy of ‘priests and people’.

All this prompts us to ask what do we really understand by Eucharist, and indeed by the People of God? Why do some receive communion, and others not? Will this continue post-Covid? What is necessary, and what is not? And how well have we educated, formed the People of God?

Post-Covid it may be helpful to give deeper consideration to how our understanding of the sacraments ... and of how the Church and the *sensus fidei* are to be understood.

BAPTISMS AND FUNERALS

At least one Diocesan website currently states that baptisms ‘should only be celebrated where there is an urgent need such as danger of death’ during this time of Covid. Perhaps we might have thought differently and offered online webinar guidance as to how to celebrate a baptism in our family home, during this time of crisis, and so empower further the People of God.

Is not the Church the People of God, and among the People of God some are ordained? Are not all the baptized permitted to baptize in case of necessity ... is not Covid a time of crisis? And at once an opportunity to encourage people to own more strongly their baptismal gift of a share in the priestly, prophetic and kingly ministry of Christ?

Another opportunity to consider *what is necessary* stems from the image of Church entering our homes this time of Pandemic. It has been striking, as many commented in the early days, how male our church seems when the only access to liturgical celebration is via the web, where day after day a man is seen leading us all in prayer, in the readings, in all that has to be done. This has changed somewhat now during our third lockdown. We have a variety of people reading or leading the singing, but we cannot often see the singer and so the stark image remains. Is this necessary? Some think it is, some wonder.

We have also seen the crisis of age, as so many of our priests are elderly, and during the very harsh cocooning instructions of the first lockdown in some cases the over 70s were severely restricted in their ability to minister by a strict reading of Government

guidelines. As well as noting that many of our priests are indeed over 70 this cocooning must ask us to consider the *ageism* in our society – racism is rightly condemned, perhaps it is time for an honest critique of ageism. Was this necessary? Could not over 70s be trusted to make wise intelligent decisions, once informed of the dangers of the virus?

It needs to be stated clearly, and proudly, that among those deemed ‘front line workers’ lie our priests, those both under 70 and over. Week after week, sometimes day after day, they preside over funerals in the most difficult of circumstances. They seek to comfort people without being able to touch them. They lead liturgies aware that family members, and friends, are oftentimes excluded from the liturgy, due to Covid number restrictions. These tasks are necessary, and very difficult, for priests and for those who mourn. It is heartening to read Dublin’s new Archbishop Dermot Farrell publicly challenging this very strict limitation on numbers at funerals. He caused me to ponder - more than 10 people can be in my local supermarket, but not in my much bigger local church. Is this just? And is it necessary?

Most of our priests live alone. They pray the mass into an empty church into a camera, or webcam. They only meet people for funerals. We must remember them, with pride and with prayer and with profound thankfulness.

And then we must also ask, is this necessary ... perhaps a married priesthood needs reconsideration not only for the Amazonian church.

OPPORTUNITY AND GIFT

This time of Pandemic is, perhaps, a gift for the Church, a time *to separate what is necessary from what is not*.

Much good has been visible. Many priests have commented on the ongoing generosity of people in their offerings to their local parishes. The Vincent de Paul collections at Christmas were in many places as good as ever; although many churches did not hold public Christmas ceremonies and those that did had restricted numbers. The *sensus fidei*, the sense of faith of the People of God, is alive and well. Common good, care for the less well off, care for those who serve us, these things have been remembered. People know this is necessary.

We have seen great creativity too. Dioceses have arranged webinars for adult faith formation, and now we are seeing them being prepared for sacramental formation. The variety of presenters in all cases has been impressive.

And as I finish my ‘parish parcel’ has just arrived through my

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email. It too is a sign of a parish alive and well, a parish committee that cares for its people.

The Church is still alive. Now is the time, we have now the opportunity to separate *what is necessary from what is not*, and to enable to flourish more visibly and strongly the *sensus fidei*, the People of God. Recently a general assembly of the Irish bishops' conference announced that the Church in Ireland is to hold a national synod within the next five years. The International Theological Commission (2018) speak of synodality as "the action of the Spirit in the communion of the Body of Christ and in the missionary journey of the People of God." In Ireland there will be five years of preparation as we journey together, as People of God, as we seek to hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Church in Ireland at this time. That we might embark on this journey courageously, intelligently, for this, let us pray.

Life Poured Out. The gospel account of the woman pouring out the alabaster jar of costly perfume on Jesus' feet (Luke 7:36-50) captures well Nano's life of self-donation to the poor. Instead of hoarding her gifts and sealing herself against the cry of God's poor, she shares with them her power, position, and prosperity. Aided by the light of a lantern flame and her walking stick, this frail woman walked Cork's grubby, muddied, smelly laneways in compassionate loving service daily. Fortified by her spiritual practices, she became love poured out for the world.

- ANNE LYONS, PBVM, *The Story of Nano Nagle, A Life Lived on the Razor's Edge*. 2021. (Dublin: Messenger Publications) p. 46.