

## Article: Fr Thomas O'Laughlin

*Masses have been suspended throughout Britain and Ireland. A leading theologian argues that, as well as a time of loss, this might be a moment to broaden our understanding of the Eucharist and to deepen our spirituality beyond the walls of our usual place of worship.*

“All Masses Cancelled.”

That sign went up today outside my local church.

Who could have imagined it just a couple of weeks ago? Most Catholics recognise it's a sensible decision: large gatherings are just what we do not want at the moment. The loving thing right now is to keep our distance, lest we transmit the virus. There are those who do not like the idea of “missing Mass”. Could they “get Mass”, they ask anxiously, even if they are not able to be physically present at a service? I have heard priests saying that they will not have “the state” – imagined as somehow the enemy of the Church – ordering them to close, and talking of “defending the freedom of religion” by “providing Mass”, even though it would be endangering the very people they are claiming to serve.

But the fact that many regular Mass goers will not be in a church this weekend – and most likely not even over Easter – might actually help us to broaden our understanding of the Eucharist and deepen our spirituality.

For too long – some historians would say since the seventh century – Latin Christians have tended to think about the Eucharist as an object (something that happens due to the activity of the priest, which the lay faithful observe rather like the audience at a play or a concert) or as a commodity (with those present behaving as religious consumers). The language we use is the giveaway. We talk about “getting Mass” and “attending a Mass”, of “getting Communion” and “taking Communion”. The image in our minds is that the Eucharist is something “out there”, which we watch or somehow obtain and make our own, as if we were theatregoers or consumers.

But the word “Eucharist” relates to a verb: it is something we, the whole People of God, do. It is the activity of thanking God the Father as a gathered community – and we offer this praise and thanks through Christ our Lord. The focus is on thanking the Father. The access to the Father is provided to us in the Spirit through Jesus Christ – and the prayers are led by the priest. It is our basic activity as Christians, not some “thing” that the priest does for us or makes for us.

So if we cannot gather because of the coronavirus, can we still offer thanks to the Father through Christ? Let's relearn some basics.

First, Jesus is present with us. Many Catholics treat church buildings as if they were pagan temples: as if God is only “in there”. But God's presence is everywhere and the risen Christ is not limited by space. This presence of the risen Jesus among the community is captured in this saying preserved in Matthew's Gospel: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (18:20). Even the smallest gathering – just two people standing two metres apart so as not to spread the virus – has the risen Lord among them. It might be two people in a house together; it might even be two people talking together on their mobile phones or on Skype. This is expressed in another ancient Christian saying – preserved in the Didache (a first-century new disciples' guide): “Wherever the things of the Lord are spoken about, there the Lord is present” (4:1).

Second, your room is a basic place of prayer. We sometimes think that we are only commanded to pray in a church building – we have grown up with the idea of attendance at Mass on Sunday as a regulation – but it is sobering to recall this instruction by Jesus: “And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the gatherings and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matthew 6:5-6).

We are now being advised not to go to work or use public transport, not to attend church services and to keep our distance from people. It's a moment for us to rediscover the art of closing the door and praying alone – knowing that the Father will listen to our prayers.

Third, we describe the Eucharist as “the centre and summit of our Christian lives”, which is true, but we often make the mistake of regarding it as the whole of our religious life. This crisis calls on us to build up the

surrounding foothills, by caring for one another and thanking God at home and in our place of study or work as well as in church. If we are not thankful for the meals and the friendship we share at home, we are hardly ready to be thankful at the Great Thanksgiving that we call “the Eucharist”.

And finally, every table is a sacred place. Jesus encountered people and taught at their tables: every table is a place where we can encounter the Lord in those with us. We will not be eating together as sisters and brothers in a church for the next few months, so let’s start recalling that whenever we eat, we should be thankful: “You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land that he has given you” (Deuteronomy 8:10). We should always be thankful for the food we eat (saying grace before meals) and for the pleasure of eating and being together (grace after meals).

Most Catholics today can barely remember the time when few of those present at Mass actually ate or drank. This was partly because of fear of condemnation for “unworthy reception” – based on a misreading of 1 Corinthians 11:27 – or for an imagined breach of the fasting regulations. An idea had also taken root that one could gain grace by attending additional Masses (or at least consecrations) – a work of “supererogation” at which one could never “receive” – which led to the development of the notion that one could obtain the spiritual blessings through a mental act of intentional volition without any physical contact. These ideas can be traced, not surprisingly, back to the Cartesian world of seventeenth-century France, and the rarified and cerebral spirituality that flourished in the Jansenist community at Port Royal near Paris. They belong to a world that saw faith as an action of the intellect, and which placed minimal value upon the liturgy as a holistic encounter of the actual body of the Church.

(Since we will all be staying in for the next few months, you might want to read the two brilliant and surprisingly entertaining chapters on Jansenism in Ronald Knox’s *Enthusiasm*.) Some have been tempted to reach for the idea of “spiritual communion” as a sort of “fix” in this emergency. Better to simply acknowledge that this is a weird time: we cannot meet up, we cannot shake hands, and we are temporarily – for very good reasons – unable to behave in the normal human way. So we cannot behave in a liturgically normal way, gathered as a people, as sisters and brothers, to be together, to sing together, to listen together while sitting in a group, to shake hands with our neighbours as friends (John 15:15) and then to share a loaf and a common cup. Until we can get back to normal, let’s just note its loss, concentrate on what we can do while we are living in isolation from one another, and then, when the restrictions are lifted, rejoice that our fellowship is restored.

We will not be gathered as large groups for the next few months – let’s use this experience to rediscover that we are the Church (it is not a building, or the preserve of the clergy), that we must be eucharistic every day (it is an act of attitude of thankfulness for all the good things of creation, particularly meals, not a performance we “attend” or an object we “get”, “take” or “receive”), and that the risen one is with us, interceding for us with the Father, in these worrying times.

Thomas O’Loughlin is professor of historical theology at the University of Nottingham, and a former president of the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain. His latest book is *Eating Together, Becoming One* (Liturgical Press, £23.99; Tablet price, £21.59).