

COVID-19'S IMPACT ON THE LITURGICAL CLIMATE

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Abstract

One of the characteristics of Liturgy is that it is dynamic and ever-changing. This is due to the fact that both the human being and the universe are constantly changing. The Liturgy must adapt to changing conditions in order to stay relevant to today's society. Covid's doggedness has changed the manner of life human beings lived. The Roman Liturgy has the similar impact. It is not the first time in the church's history that change has occurred, and this article explains that change is a natural feature of the Catholic Liturgy that should not be regarded with suspicion but rather as an integral element of its character. In this presentation, the author has made an honest attempt to pinpoint a few of the recent changes that have happened as a consequence of Covid-19's effect.

Keywords: *Change; Covid-19; Ecclesiology; Liturgy; Mission; Roots; Theology*

Introduction

According to Heraclitus' writings, everything in the world is subject to change from moment to moment. In our reality, what is constant is a crucial component of what changes. Those who are unable to adapt will be left in the dust. The church, which is greatly

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influenced by the rapidly changing world, is also affected. The Covid pandemic is one of the most acute crisis impacting the globe right now. It has a significant impact on the whole human race. One school of thought divides history into two periods: pre-Covid and post-Covid. The sheer sight of it has caused horror turmoil and confusion throughout the planet. Several people's deaths and the deaths of their loved ones have been chronicled in recent years.

This explains why many folks preferred to stay at home and why churches were closed. It seemed as if the church would be shut off from the community, and individuals would be denied access to the sacraments. It is claimed that necessity is the inventor's instructor. The Liturgy, like the rest of the world, adapted to the epidemic. To help satisfy the demand, several churches have swiftly turned to online masses and prayer meetings. Covid directly impacted theology, sacraments, evangelization, and ecclesiology. These four liturgical components that were formerly considered peripheral have suddenly become central to Liturgy. To improve our awareness of changes, we want to be able to study them so that we can be sure that what we do in the Liturgy is not just a fad but rather a hint of something more significant lying underneath the surface.

Changing the Course of Ecclesiology

Every 500 years, the Catholic Church confronts and overcomes difficulties. Dyer¹ believes institutionalized Christianity must be rebuilt in 500-year phases to resurgence and new development. The Church's golden age began with the reign of Constantine, the Roman emperor who established Christianity as the official religion. The Dark Ages started in the sixth century as a result of political and social situations. After five hundred years, the second stage of Reformation occurred. The Great Schism of 1054 facilitated the division of Eastern Orthodoxy and Western Roman Catholicism. The Third Great Reformation came to a productive climax in 1517 when Luther pinned his thesis to the church door. In the sixteenth century, the most significant change was doctrinal. "New faith" and "new expressions" (among others) have more to do with Church reform than they do with Scripture and Sacraments. The Reformation began in response to a seeming wicked and heretical priesthood.

The Reformation occurred as a result of the Church's alleged lack of relevance concerning the Gospel and its purpose. The twentieth century, the fourth stage, saw the Church make liturgical changes

¹W. Dreyer, "The Real Crisis of the Church," *Theological Studies* 71, 3 (2015) 5.

and theological revisions in the Roman Missal and provide active involvement to the laity in the celebration of the sacraments. The post-council churches reflect a tension between conservatives' need for precise definitions and postmoderns' acceptance of a lack of clarity and diversity. Traditional churches failing to comfort postmodern millennials is perhaps one of the primary causes for change. A shift in society may herald the birth of a new church. The question is how the Church plans to convey the Gospel in a changing world. The conclusion is that the Church has survived its crises via adaptation to evolving global events and has never lost sight of its purpose of evangelization through the ages.

In the current situation, the globe is confronted with Covid Pandemic catastrophe. The Church adapts and responds in its unique manner. The COVID-19 epidemic, in our view, has resulted in a fundamental change in the churches. It is about rapid, snappy, forced, and radically altered ways of operation; churches were obliged to operate in accordance with contemporary operating procedures. The COVID-19 shutdown in India caused significant disruption to Christian families. Religious gatherings were prohibited. There were no churches that observed post-Easter festivities. Several early Christians believed that celebrating, praying, and gathering for worship were necessary components of Christianity. Almost all catastrophes are precipitated by historical, theological, pastoral, and financial strains on the Church. The problem stems mainly from the Church's inability to "be the church."² In short, the Church's communitarian character was gone from all of its ceremonies. Individuals were unable to participate actively. Indeed, the Church is afflicted with an undiscovered sickness. The churches reacted immediately to the Pandemic crisis. As with so many other churches, the digital Church became a reality. Numerous churches have had to adapt their meditations, sacraments, sermons, and offerings to make them more accessible online. The majority of us think that this is one of the most effective methods to maintain faith in difficult circumstances. The current situation has spawned a new breed of churches and religious rituals. Because of the epidemic, so much good has transpired in the Church. It seems like we have found our way into a new church.

Underlining the importance of people understanding themselves to be a part of the Church, this lockdown situation shows that it is not how many priests are present, but whether or not the laity, the

²Dreyer, "The Real Crisis of the Church," 5.

people, honestly believe that they are all part of the Church even if no ordained priest or pastor is there. The COVID-19 process has helped us rediscover Christ's presence, just as it was for the people in the first resurrection: intense joy, intense agony, and a feeling of amazement and awe. Lindsay, OGS³ explains that a rediscovery of Christ's presence in the sacraments, along with the ceremonial practices of sacraments being de-institutionalized and liberated, is what is needed. Do not expect it to be as simple as slipping out of their robes. Instead of dumping things down, we must make it easy for people to confront the mystery by demystifying it. Some congregation members were concerned about the Church's flexibility, but the Church has once again shown that it is the faith, not the institutions, that count. It all comes down to relevance. It means that if the Church is oblivious of the changing cultural background or ignore it, the Gospel will continue to be presented using approaches that fail to connect with today's young people.⁴

Evangelization of Relation

COVID-19 has inadvertently highlighted the question of what it means to be Church (body of Christ) without visiting Church (place of worship). Due to the fact that churches are not authorized to gather visibly, COVID-19 may be teaching us what it means to be the invisible Church. There is sufficient evidence that many individuals are more connected to the institutional parts of Christianity and worship church buildings than to the institution's intended beneficiary. While both church organizations and structures are essential to the Church's mission, none is an adequate core to establish a church. The Church is defined by the One in whom it believes, and everything else ecclesiastical exists to serve rather than to displace that One.⁵ The new Coronavirus brings the Church's institutional thinking into question. While being faithful to the Church's fundamental characteristics (one, holy, catholic, and apostolic), we are now called to focus on the Church's missionary nature. Priority is given to God's mission pursued by the Church.

³OGS, LU and Croft, S, ed., *What is the Sacramental Ministry's Role in New Church Expressions? Mission-Shaped Questions: Defining Issues for Today's Church*, London, Church House Publishing, 2009.

⁴J. Carson, *Becoming Familiar with the Emerging Church*, London: Grand Rapids, 2005.

⁵DR. Peel, *Reforming Theology: Reforming Theology: Explorations in the United Reformed Church's Theological Traditions*, London: the United Reformed Church, 2002.

COVID-19 also challenges us to reconsider the Church's definition of community. Christian faith and practice are founded on the invitation to the community. The Godhead established the notion of the community; God is a community (Trinity), and the Church (*ekklesia*) refers to any community, whether local, citywide, or global. God operates through communities, and whenever God works through individuals, he returns them to the community.⁶ When Niemandt discusses the future Church, he captures the relational aspect that Fresh Expressions embrace and encourage. He thinks that relationships will drive the future Church. Increasingly, the Church will operate as a community rather than a weekly assembly. On the other hand, a missionary church is relational in nature since the objective is to establish a community of believers (*ekklesia*). Guder emphasizes the importance of the Christian community in terms of its vocational mission and responsibility 'to be witnesses'.⁷ In the event of a coronavirus pandemic, what will happen to the Christian population? Even if the doors of the churches are closed, and the sacraments are not celebrated, the Church will continue to exist provided it exhibits a relational character among its believers.

Returning to our Sacramental Roots

We have been used to physically congregating for public worship for an extended period of time. That is when the assembly as a whole celebrates and honours God. It is a time of joy, fellowship, faith renewal, and hope renewal. Pastors have historically urged their congregations to "come to church," and some have been known to shame Christians who do not attend. Church closures reversed this trend predictably, with an invitation to 'follow us on YouTube or other technological platforms.' While it is essential to honour the Church's tradition of "gathering to worship," the pandemic has caused us to reexamine our gathering practices. We immediately see that the Church, whatever its troubles, must unite. While the physical buildings of churches have been abandoned, churches (people of God) continue to exist and operate. We see far too often in Christianity a departure from family (usually as a cause of spiritual failure) and an arrival into regulated performances in hallowed institutions apart from everyday life. As a result of the COVID-19 outbreak, the Church is returning to its roots. It brings church history

⁶ J. Pillay, *Community Transformation through the Future Church*, Cape Town: International Conference, 2016.

⁷ C.J.P. Niemandt, "Theology of Place, Rooted in Christ and Grounded in Neighborhoods," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 40, 1 (2019) 225.

to a close-by returning to its origins at the culmination of world history. Consequently, churches have not perished but have reverted to their original form: a church in every household (domestic churches).⁸

Many worshippers were compelled to utilize mobile outlets as a result of the COVID-19 shutdown. Additionally, it provided an opportunity for Christians to experiment with new forms of prayer, liturgical practices, and preaching. Digital media enables “travelling” and exploration. Many worshippers discover that their religious traditions and rituals have been enhanced, while others find a whole new world of devotion. Channel switching has become a typical behaviour among ‘seekers.’ Previously, pastors mandated that their flocks attend services in their assigned region parishes. When those who attended services in adjacent parishes and retreat centres sought sacraments and services from their local churches, they were mocked and treated as second-class citizens. The crisis demonstrated that worship is unrelated to denomination, priesthood, times or locations of service. COVID-19 has expanded market preference options, and fans of favoured preachers are no longer restricted to their home church. It enables individuals to choose and use the content they choose to see, listen to, and interact with others. Pastors have lost power over their flocks. It is the ancient churches’ liberty. There were no longer limits, for Covid extended the same freedom to the believers. Through modern media, a broader range of Christian worshippers is being attracted to Christianity.

The Trinity God’s worship is universal, and no one has a monopoly on it. Active worship does more than only meet the needs of one’s own goals and resources. The sacraments and authentic worship provide Grace and Hope to those who find themselves in dismal circumstances. The sacramental grace is available to anyone who approaches it in faith, not only Christians. Other than Christianity, many faiths across the globe have transmitted Christ’s light. Other faiths and denominations have failed to reflect Christ’s splendour. When we confront the problems of contemporary life and turn to electronic channels for support and hope, the rise of COVID-19 has increased our prospects of reaching out to people of many faiths and even those who are agnostic. This is not a new phenomenon, but it is one that many Christians are facing right now. It would not be conceivable without the current pandemics.

⁸E.R. Brink, *Wise Church: Discovering Faith and Worship with Christians all Over the World*, Michigan: Grand Rapids, 2013.

The pandemic taught us that the Church's primary responsibility is not to attract people but to provide salvation and growth in missions around the world. God's primary aim is not for a church to be filled to capacity or to provide an infinite number of services. Making the Church more attractive and inviting makes it more difficult for competitor churches to surpass it. God's only purpose is the salvation of the soul, and Christ has commissioned the Church to carry out his mission on earth via the Holy Spirit. It is the true spirit of liturgy in its proper sense. If we realize this, we will devote our time, energy, and resources to fostering disciples of Jesus who want to be active members of the worshipping community and participants in God's purpose.⁹

New Modes of Christ-Centred Theology

Christians, in essence, have emphasized various parts and understandings of mission, according to their history and denomination. The mission is defined as the salvation of souls, service (diakonia), worship (leiturgia), change of society, community, humanization, community development and church planting for a definition of mission. Emphasizing one or more parts of a mission does not make it incorrect; it only falls short of a thorough biblical understanding of the mission. The biblical emphasis on God's kingdom (reign) gives a succinct description of the Christian mission. The COVID-19 experience leads us to a more proper perspective of Christian mission, emphasising the kingdom of God rather than the Church. How can we see and comprehend God's presence during a pandemic that has infected millions of people, killed hundreds of thousands, and disrupted and wrecked human lives and communities? The epidemic forces us to consider the world's situation rather than focusing only on the Church's interior.

Historically, the primary goal of the mission was to bring the 'world' into the church. However, this notion of mission has been challenged by groups such as Fresh Expressions and Emerging Churches, whose primary objective is to reach individuals who are beyond the reach of the established church. This pursuit transforms the movement into a predominantly missional one.¹⁰ It was evident that it will wait indefinitely if the church waits for society to come to it. As a result, these new groups are far more preoccupied with the 'go' word than with the 'coming' word. It is about breaking new ground in terms of interacting with individuals for them to connect

⁹Brink, *Wise Church: Discovering Faith and Worship with Christians all Over the World*.

¹⁰G. Cray, *Making Disciples for the Future Church*, International Church Conference, Cape Town, 2016.

with Jesus. The present church concept is based on 'gather for worship, disperse for the mission.' Reaching the unchurched requires a strategy distinct from traditional mission techniques.

Often, the church gained fresh awareness regarding the world's issues and shifted their ministries toward God's kingdom instead of the church's conventional interests. COVID-19 infection rate is rising in India, with millions of job losses, hundreds of businesses closing, and severe malnutrition. Sometimes, the church has to support those in need. Church programs that use COVID-19 legislation are inspiring and empowering, as well. They will also continue doing so in the face of goodwill and expectation. COVID-19 also has the potential to increase the church's accessibility, not only to its members but to all people. Regrettably, the majority of internet church services are targeted toward the faithful and seldom address individuals without faith. While COVID-19 has increased access to the church for many more people, it also has limited access to the church to those who can use the electronic platform. This, of course, excludes the vast majority of impoverished individuals who cannot afford Internet access. Churches must evaluate how they might be 'present' in the most critical locations.

The church demonstrates its integrity and commitment to the Gospel by taking up the world's challenges and sorrows, favouring the poor, and joining God in moving the world toward justice, peace, and wholeness of life for all people and creation. Bosch reminds us that mission is God's 'yes' to the world, "submitted in the belief that there is continuity between God's kingdom, the church's mission, and social justice, peace, and wholeness, and that redemption also involves what happens to individuals in this world."¹¹

Churches should become centres of solidarity, networks of compassion, empathy, healing, and emotional support in the face of illness, fear, suffering, and hunger during the COVID-19 period. In light of this, Moltmann continues, "Christian theology must be current theology in the positive sense," and it must "share the sufferings of this present time" with the whole creation. Theology that is Christian must be acknowledged as such. It must rediscover its Christian identity in each era. There must be a dialectical process of adjustment and reformation, relevance and identity development.¹²

¹¹ D. Bosch, *Changing the Focus of the Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Mission Theology*, New York: Orbis Books, 1991, 11.

¹² H. Kung, D. Tracy, J. Moltmann, *Theological Paradigm change: A Symposium for the Future*, New York: Crossroad, 1989, 220-224.

Conclusion

Changes have occurred inside the church for an extended period, yet specific long-standing issues have never been compromised. Regardless of whether we are aware of it or not, change will happen all around us. As a result of Covid-19, the lives of many individuals have been greatly influenced, as well as the procedures by which the church is operated. Many positive changes are occurring, and those changes are projected to persist well through the timeframe of credible results. We are also members of the 'new church,' and we must be aware of any action that can jeopardize the church's core ideals. Our primary worry about our modifications is that we do not risk damaging our critical principles in Liturgy and sacraments. Because of the ban on in-person worship during the pandemic, churches have had to find new ways to interact digitally.

While numerous useful innovations emerged during this time period, some problematic liturgical practices were also revealed, demonstrating that further work is still needed in many localities to implement Vatican II's liturgical reforms successfully. Streaming liturgies lack genuine congregations and often feature a single priest in the sanctuary, skewing the roles of congregation and presider. Some pastors on the internet neglect liturgical standards that go along with our sacred liturgies and regulations concerning sacraments. Other sacraments have been similarly adjusted since they have been streamlined for ease and accordance with social distance requirements. Where liturgical innovations focus on scripture, whether via an expanded lectionary utilized at Mass or the inclusion of readings in the celebration of each sacrament, this focus has gradually diminished in practice. Poor liturgies have evolved from the increasingly slack implementation of rules, reflecting a basic lack of knowledge of the liturgy's meaning.

At this point, the problem remains unclear, and experts argue that internet communication techniques have just begun to address it. As we plan our response to crises, we must always bear in mind whether we are helping the churches revitalize their practice while neglecting the call of the Second Vatican Council. Instead of reverting to pre-COVID business as usual, some liturgists think we should utilize this pause to review and fully implement the renewal.