

The Church with the Common Experience of the Pandemic?

Ivana Noble

In this article I will explore the question of the role the experience of the pandemic plays and can play for the church as one, albeit diverse people of God, and for individual churches in which this people lives. I will first seek to offer a methodological reflection on what constitutes experience. Then I will outline several important moments that the period of life with closed churches has shown as if under magnifying glass. These moments are related to spiritual practice, theological orientation, and ecclesio-political beliefs. However, it is not clear whether they were perceived by all, and whether all perceived them in the same way. And that is what leads me to reflect on the notion of experience.

Do we have common experience?

I prefer the dynamic understanding of experience, introduced by Franz Brentano in the late 1800s. He maintained that not every event is experience. One could, therefore, argue that even though the global world – including the church – has gone through common events during the pandemic, this does not necessarily mean that all had the same experience. Experience includes understanding and, as Brentano asserts, also the movement of will and emotions. Getting insight into something, taking a stand, engaging in action – all these do not happen immediately. Furthermore, each comprehensive understanding develops and undergoes changes. In Brentano's words, events are present at the level of our consciousness in three different ways. First, it is presentation. This takes us, via Husserl, to Heidegger's concept of Dasein, "being there," that refers to our being thrown in a situation. This thrownness is what Christians, churches, health workers, politicians, believers and nonbelievers, healthy and sick, the helping and the self-interested, have had in common since the beginning of the pandemic. However, this does not mean that they have experienced, not to say understood, it together. At the level of presentation, according to Brentano, the question of truth does not even appear yet. Instead of a "post-truth society," we therefore find ourselves in a "pre-truth state." Nevertheless, this pre-truth level discloses completely different opportunities than the self-deluded relativism that is convinced to be done with truth once and for all. After all, this problem, too, was displayed as if under magnifying glass in the society and churches, with some coming to a new understanding based on this presentation. The second way that follows presentation, sometimes immediately, at other times at a distance, is, according to Brentano, judgment. Today, we would probably turn to more elaborated theories of interpretation. David Tracy revisits the question of meaning and truth when he says that although we can view events from many different perspectives, there are things that again and again appear in every good interpretation. In other words, not every judgment is right, not every interpretation is good – but those that are good, have something in common. Teilhard de Chardin asserted something similar when he said that whatever transcends itself, it also converges at a certain moment. However, convergence does not simply represent one theory of interpretation, like veracity. Similarly, it is not that we would, in our interpretation, finally grasp through a perfect conceptual system something that we have been presented. One needs to return to presentation again and again – both when one has made an evident error in interpretation

and when there is no such error (or, at least no error that one would be aware of). I even believe that if we work with the first state of "pre-truthfulness" to a greater extent, there will be less need for "post-truth" – perhaps with the exception of overt manipulators for whom "post-truth" represents part and parcel of their program. The third level of experience, for Brentano, is the movement of will and emotions. Here, pleasure or resentment, love, fear or contempt are intertwined with the will to act. Brentano did not manage to find a single satisfactory term for this completion of experience. Still, his intuition told him that understanding, if to be authentic, is not self-enclosed nor reduced to human reason. Rather, it involves the whole human being with his or her virtues and relationships. If we ask what the church and churches can learn from the experience of the pandemic, I think that using a more comprehensive concept of experience can be useful.

If I follow Brentano's understanding of experience, I must begin with a fundamental problem: if I want to discuss the first and constituent level of the experience of the church and churches during the pandemic, it must be integrated with the next two levels right from the outset. My speaking is an act – it includes the movement of will and emotions and each attempt to grasp it conceptually already involves a decision regarding my choice of words to describe the event. Therefore, if I now stop at a chain of events from the pandemic period that I consider to be significant, both the interpretations of these events and the emotions and actions that these events inspire cannot be separated from each other. Still, I think that it is helpful for us to know that the respective levels of the experience are mutually irreducible. The moments in life with closed churches that I would like to briefly consider are the following: the way the state relates to churches and their representatives; the way the society relates to the values and needs that people associate with churches; spiritual and theological competences across churches; and the relationship to the virtual and physical realities that illuminates the importance of the church as icon.

The state relating to churches and their representatives

The closing of the churches that took place in the vast majority of countries around the world at the beginning of the pandemic disclosed a pattern of power relations: the state dictates the rules, and the churches must follow these rules (or, at best, they can moderately negotiate the specific forms of these rules). In the Czech Republic and other post-communist countries, this modus vivendi reminded the believers of the era of communism. However, there was a difference in the reason for making such a radical decision. The emergence of an unknown infectious disease, hardly detectable in case of some people and lethal for others, justified the state of emergency and the restrictions of the human rights, including religious liberties. Nevertheless, the memories of the totalitarian regime were not a matter of the past exclusively. Why? The pandemic hit the world in a period when totalitarian thinking was on the rise and populist governments benefitted from the crisis of democracy. It was, therefore, more difficult to trust the governmental measures and restrictions of the human rights. It was more difficult to believe that the governments would not abuse the situation for their own political and economic interests, seeking to silence the dissenting voices, including those from the church. At the same time, however, it was necessary to get united in our efforts, while being alert to any different efforts that might possibly have appeared. Furthermore, certain forms of representation of church leaders kept on reappearing. In the media, their subordinate role was frequently reduced to negotiations about the conditions

under which churches could reopen. As far as the state was concerned, the churches and their representatives were no important partners in the decision-making process regarding how best we could go through the pandemic. Unlike the communist period, however, they did not pose any threat to the state politics, either. Due to their negligibility, the state could easily afford to overlook them and their closed churches. However, this does not mean that religious questions and rhetoric would disappear from the political scene. In the massive confrontation with a vague threat, death, the absence of scientific knowledge, a failure of healthcare and social service systems in the countries that we had considered to be developed and that were not so far from us, there even appeared the need for prayer, hope, and relating to someone other than ourselves. In fact, religious themes also appeared in the speeches of the Czech prime minister, Andrej Babiš. Yet, it is hard to judge whether this was his own authentic reflection on the fact that he, too, had to face death, or whether it was merely a utilitarian exploitation of the topic. Perhaps both. Be that as it may, even if we put aside the question of how this need could have been exploited populistically, another question is relevant for our reflection, namely, why the government representatives sought to address this need all by themselves, without inviting the churches and their representatives to the process.

The society relating to the values and needs that people associate with churches

During the pandemic, I collaborated with people from various media and centers that released information on, among other things, theological faculties and their activities. I was surprised by an admittedly well-intended attempt to include the theological faculties among the institutions providing consolation for elderly people. During one conversation on this topic, I could not help recalling the image of religion as a crutch for the weak whom life would otherwise treat badly; the image of religion as the opium that had once been administered as a sedative to alleviate pain and help forget the cruel reality of life. It was noteworthy that the people formulating these ideas did not live during the communist regime even as children. Does it mean that the "return of religion," or at least "religiosity," once again comes to one of its ends? Is the pendulum going to steer toward the opposite pole now? I have no sociological data available to allow me going beyond these questions. But the questions keep coming back.

Moreover, these questions face us in the situation when we everywhere encounter the utilitarian attitude of our society. Prosperity sets the tone not only because it serves as the benchmark for other values but also because everything that is worthy of attention in the life of a society can be measured as a value through the lens of prosperity; in a certain sense, values thus can be "commodified." Running the risk of oversimplification, the basic pattern can be introduced as follows. When people have needs (including spiritual needs), values determine the "exchange rate" according to which these needs are to be fulfilled.

During the pandemic, the churches found themselves in a situation when, despite their inferior political standing, numerous people, both believers and nonbelievers, expected them to provide help, or, at least, inspiration for seeking and finding a direction in life and the ways how to adequately get a grip on and survive these strange times. Although reducing the situations in which these things happened to "spiritual needs" and to "fulfilling those needs" might have made the churches more intelligible for people with a utilitarian

mindset, the "price" was too high. The reason was that such a reduction of a multi-dimensional desire and its pursuit to a definable "need" presupposes certain hermeneutical violence: it requires fitting all that one is presented with into a single ready-made and comprehensible pigeon-hole and cutting-off all that is incompatible or adding something else that did not actually appear in the presentation so that the pigeon-hole is filled up accurately. And then, rather than responding to a human being, one can respond to a "need." When a catechesis, prayer or blessing aim at fulfilling needs, churches lose their own "competences" and become incompetent. To put it differently, they inadequately respond to the situation they find themselves in. Nevertheless, it does not mean that there is no adequate way of communication that would facilitate people talking about their needs and together seeking, and finding, what could be of help for them. Also, there are ways when people recognize that they have received something they really needed, albeit without being able to name and identify their need. Moreover, if theology and ecclesial practice are competent, they must care about human needs in a concrete time and situation – knowing that they must relate to people rather than to "needs."

Spiritual and theological competences across churches

Still, one could also observe a whole array of competent responses during the pandemic. Many of my students appreciated the invitation to a regular evening prayer. It did not matter whether it was a Roman Catholic invitation to the 8pm intercessory prayer or an Orthodox invitation to the 9pm Jesus Prayer. Both invitations were accepted by people from various traditions. They appreciated the experience of belonging and being reminded that it is through prayer that people in diverse situations, time zones, cultures, and religions carry each other on their way with and toward God. It was more than once that I heard people saying, "Why did I actually stop doing this before?" It reminded me of a scene in the famous Czech fairytale film, *The Proud Princess*, when the king asks: "Why did I ban singing?"

Competent ecclesial inputs to the territory of prayer drew from the mystical tradition of the church, providing the people who cared for it not only with impulses, for example, by way of daily meditations, but also with conversations or structured forms of spiritual accompaniment. In many cases, denominational, Christian or other affiliation did not play any other role than simply setting a context in which people found themselves and which illuminated what symbolic systems they might understand and, to the contrary, which would likely be alien for them. Here, the churchliness of competent accompaniment in prayer lay in opening opportunities for drawing energy and inspiration from a long, rich, and living tradition that includes both contemporary believers and contemporary seekers. It was encouraging to see both the unity and the diversity of various good forms of accompaniment which did not follow denominational borderlines. For instance, my friend from the Czechoslovak Hussite Church told me that she thought it was not a good idea to put her own sermons or reflections on the internet when she could simply direct people to the Carmelite website "Fortna" that featured top-quality Catholic preachers as part of its talk-series "U ambonu" (At the ambon) (see <https://www.fortna.eu/uambonu>). Instead, she used her time for conversations with people over the phone and, when possible again, in person – with Hussites, Catholics, Protestants, seekers, ...

Another important moment that showed the spiritual and theological competence of many people actually represented the unwillingness to reduce their mission to providing consolation. Having said this, I do not mean to claim that consolation would not be needed. However, consolation should never come without transformation. Christian theology, both liturgical and ascetic, at its best helps people, individually and collectively, find God by immersing them more deeply into their own life, live their lives more authentically, and learn to discern – through this life and all its experiments – whatever nourishes life from whatever deforms and destroys it. Long before the modern and postmodern eras, these traditions took seriously the fact that humans were both ritual and mimetic beings; that the ritual can sustain people, mediating transcendence and a common meaning more holistically than any explanation or shared rules; that the ritual can stand not only between the divine and human realities but also between the demonic and human realities. One enters the ritual by learning to imitate what people have in common to be able to find a space for relationships that are unique – the relationships with God, other people, and the earth with all its creatures.

The pandemic prevented most Christians from participating in regular rituals. There were no public Sunday worship services; Christians had to cope with undesirable Eucharistic fasting; it was difficult, and sometimes even impossible, to receive the sacrament of penance, not even during Easter (of 2020); catechumens could not be baptized. Responses to this situation by ordained and lay Christians differed, again, across church traditions. In addition to the efforts to transpose as much as possible of the usual "business" into a virtual form, there were also other, more creative instances of responsible and erudite experimenting with the ritual. For example, Maundy Thursday, when the Last Supper is commemorated, was in many households associated with a Christian alternative to the Seder meal. Families, and sometimes friends, met in allowed small groups for the service of the word connected with meal, blessings, and the sharing of food and a cup. While they did not seek to replace the Eucharist, they actually experienced something that establishes the Eucharist at its core. Some had already encountered this practice in monasteries, for example, in the community of Grandchamp that adopted this custom from environments where Jews, Christians, Muslims lived together. Others were introduced to it indirectly.

Needless to say, other, and older, questions and forms of sharing returned in new expressions. The Orthodox, more than any other Christians, asked whether the church can exist at all if it does not celebrate the Eucharist. For some, this question was connected with existential anxiety, while for others, with a protest against the restrictions. However, I could also see efforts to accept that the liturgy is celebrated "somewhere" and the local priest who is not allowed to celebrate it here and now can participate in this celebration, for example, by being available during the time of liturgy to anyone who might pass along the church door and be interested in a conversation – with face masks on. It is a question how to evaluate the initiatives of some Orthodox priests and communities who attempted to disobey the bans and find some minimalist way for the believers to access the liturgy and sacraments, even at the cost of a possible – and mostly actual – confrontation with the police. If we would like to evaluate the situation through the lens of a culturally conditioned conflict of values that eventually led to spiritual needs (the liturgy) being given preference over physical needs (measures to protect the health of people), we would only get a 2D image of the

reality. There would be concrete people missing in this image, with their complex experiences at all three levels that Brentano's analysis of experience distinguishes: presentation, judgment, and the movement of will and emotions.

In the Roman Catholic Church, but also the Czechoslovak Hussite Church and the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, the question came back of whether vicarious celebration and reception could have viable forms. Again, an alternative emerged in all three of these traditions, considering whether it might be helpful that the ordained minister eucharistically fasts in solidarity with the laypeople. Although many people had good experiences that at the first sight appear to be contradictory, there might be something in these experiences that belongs to each good interpretation of common events. This "something" is symbolic in nature. It means that we can say something but not everything about it. Furthermore, when speaking about it, each one of us speak about it in a somewhat different way. Subsequently, good speech leads us to a further "something" as to a kind of living center in which we participate together. One can say that none of these good forms of celebration was individualistic, even though some of them might have taken place in solitude. They were not aimed at gaining spiritual "advantages" over others. Rather, they sought to possibly include everyone and everything in the memory, prayer, and benediction, again, without telling God what exactly this benediction should be for particular individuals and communities. None of the good forms of fasting led to idleness or resignation. Rather, it led to increased alertness to enable that which was to speak through that which was not. The reduction to such a minor local level that even two or three could not physically gather, and one had to be on one's own, was connected with a robust global awareness that in this solitude we were together even with those most distant ones. And a great distance sometimes meant great nearness.

The relationship to the virtual and physical realities: the church as icon

The virtual mediation of spiritual life has opened venues for new opportunities – and new questions. The first of them concerned what can be seen as an "icon" of the church. In the world of IT, the term "icon" refers to an image that one can click on to open a program that the image symbolizes. During the pandemic, the volume of online religious production rapidly increased, although the quality differed. Church leadership and local ministers and preachers tried to compensate for the closed churches by giving the believers an opportunity to participate in usual activities online – without their physical presence. Technically, it was possible. However, the concept of the church as icon was also defined in the framework of the IT world. Moreover, a whole number of additional initiatives emerged in this period: sermons and other talks, worship services, prayers, adorations, etc. that people could enter by simply clicking on a respective icon. These initiatives included good things as well as all kinds of religious pathology. If one did not belong to the groups that predated this virtual boom, one had no tools other than one's subjective taste to distinguish quality from trash. Seekers who came across, for example, the ideas of a judging God who allegedly used the covid-19 to pay the world for secularization, same-sex marriage or abortion, did not necessarily make it further to other "icons," clicking on which would provide a critique of such distorted images of God. I regard this absence of common discernment to be as significant as other realities that pointed to the limits of the virtual

sharing of spiritual life. People simply missed physical contact and physical communion; the symbolic profundity of two or three gathering in Christ's name could not be automatically transposed in the full extent.

The broadening of the idea of the church as icon to include a more original concept than the one we know from computer screens was not satisfied with the automatized transposition of a part of the visible life of churches, religious activists, and fanatics. In Eastern Christianity, icons belong to the liturgical space; they represent windows to heaven. Their purpose is to witness and mediate the fullness of life in God. Their witness and mediation very intensely work with physical reality – wood, paints, character typologies, gestures, inverted perspectives. We could glimpse some of these in those more creative attempts during the pandemic that sought to address liturgical celebration or liturgical fasting, prayers and rituals, including simple expressions of thanks to physicians, paramedics, and social workers by clapping from open windows; they involved physical reality – and restrictions thereof. Regardless of whether it involved the communities that gathered in small numbers and prayed behind closed doors, families or individuals, this original iconic nature of their spiritual life involved working with whatever was physically available: families spent more time together, many people started spending more time in nature, and spiritual life often had to be simplified as a result of a radically increased volume of work, with one relying on being carried by the prayers of others. As such, the online space could play a supporting role. Some people appreciated the moments when they could, after a shift of home schooling and home office, listen to a passage from Meister Eckhart or a good sermon while cooking. Consumerism – or inspiration? The pandemic provided a magnifying lens to display a simple truth that the same thing can mean something diametrically opposite for people with different mindsets. Online production provided an opportunity for a greater degree of both consumption and inspiration. As for the church, its forms of life and the persons that iconically represented these forms, an Orthodox saying applied, namely, that an icon should not obstruct a prayer; on the contrary, a good icon enables a prayer, and an excellent icon teaches how to pray.

In conclusion

The events during the pandemic, I believe, presented the church with such a great experiment that she could otherwise never realize all by herself. Learning how to understand not only these events but also a whole array of their interpretations, the emotions related therewith, and the forms of practical and ritual behavior can immensely help Christians and churches to get better insight into their own place in today's world and into the core that nourishes the life of their faith and practice.