

The Church after the Pandemic

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Since I am not a predictor, I do not dare pronouncing any forecasts regarding possible changes in the church after the pandemic. However, I was invited to this colloquium to present some theses from the article “Co přineslo uzavření kostelů” (On some implications of the closedown of the churches) that I published online at www.christnet.eu.¹ Therefore, I am rather going to explore the church during the pandemic, using the experience of a lay Christian. To avoid the risk of merely reiterating what everyone can read on Christnet, I thought I would give this theme a popcultural framework. After all, the pandemic gave us ample opportunities to spend our evenings watching films and TV series and we can read much about the virtual, physical, other realities being intertwined, so I see no reason for holding back.

Quentin Tarantino dismantles a legend

Tarantino's 2019 film, *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*, which is, in fact, a meta-film, and Tarantino's last film to date, featured a combat scene with the fictional character of stunt man Cliff Booth (Brad Pitt) fighting Bruce Lee (he was the guy who defeated Chuck Norris in the 1972 film *Return of the Dragon*). In Tarantino's film, Cliff provoked the fight by voicing his doubt whether Bruce Lee had ever fought for real at all. The fight ended with a tie, nevertheless, evoking disputes and questions, how it really was with Bruce Lee. Thanks to this, my attention was caught by an article on the ESPN website entitled “Could Bruce Lee win a real fight?” which addressed this cinematographic combat.² How was it really then?

In 1958 in Hong Kong where he studied under a master of Wing Chun Kung Fu, Bruce Lee (aged 18) took on Gary Elms, the city champion in that weight division the previous three years. The western boxing match ended after three rounds with Bruce knocking Elms down in each one of them.

Three years later (1961), in Seattle, WA, Bruce Lee was challenged by Yoichi Nakachi, the local Shinpu-Ren karate master. The fight ended after mere 11 seconds with Yoichi Nakachi down on the floor with a skull fracture.

Still three years later (1964), a fight was arranged to take place in Bruce's training studio in Oakland between Bruce and Wong Jack Man, a kung fu master of the same age and a fellow-émigré from Hong Kong. Man felt outraged by Bruce's unflattering public remarks about traditional kung fu. The duel ended in three minutes with Bruce's victory.

¹ http://www.christnet.eu/clanky/6395/co_prineslo_uzavreni_kostelu.url

² https://www.espn.com/espn/story/_/id/29266542/could-bruce-lee-win-real-fight

Dysfunctional tradition and orthodoxy

These are Bruce Lee's documented "real fights" before he became a movie star. Despite the fact that he crushingly won all of them, they led him questioning the meaning of the orthodox kung fu style as the techniques themselves were of no use for him in real fights. Matthew Polly, Bruce Lee's biographer, summarizes Lee's deliberations as follows: "In the old days, you'd do what your teacher tells you, because it's a 500-year tradition and you're supposed to keep the tradition going. Lee was the first person to come out and explicitly say (in a public lecture he held after an exhibition in Oakland): 'Traditions and styles are stupid. All that matters is what works for you.' And people hated him for that at the time.' Nevertheless, thanks to his approach, many MMA fighters today see him as the founding father of their discipline. Some adore him as a kind of patron saint, quoting some of his statements. One of the most famous of these is: "The real fighter is like water. When water enters a cup, it becomes the cup."

The church in an unusual situation

This brings us back to our theme of the church during the pandemic. Traditions and orthodoxy are dysfunctional vis-à-vis real fight. They fail because they prevent life from filling newly vacant space swiftly and intuitively like water. What did the ban on public worship services tell us about the church in today's world? What happened with Christianity while churches were closed? Did it adaptively become a cup, or convulsively insist on remaining the jar? It is for a sociologist to give an answer to this question. I would honestly be interested in quantitative research on how Christianity experienced this situation. It would be good to know it because it could be the best possible report on the state of the church.

In my article for Christnet I wrote that I strongly felt something like fear of their position being threatened in some responses by the clergy. I sensed a struggle to disable the church from becoming a cup, forcing it to remain the jar instead. Rather than withdrawing and reflection on the new situation, many church ministers sought to fight their way into the private space of closed households via TV or online broadcast of worship services or by "window-administering" of the Eucharist for immediate use or home supplies. I found it ridiculous and physically distasteful. I will explain why in my conclusion.

We also know that the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments penned decrees on ways to liturgically celebrate the Easter Triduum in the given situation, as if the end of the world were to come without their regulations. I thought this was embarrassing, too. It was as if these people were trying to send out a signal that the Catholics were the most wretched of all people, being bound by rules and tormented by artificial spiritual needs that could not well be satisfied in the situation of closed churches. The implication was that they went through greater discomfort and needed greater care than the ordinary nonbeliever.

Few clergymen offered something from the thousand-year-old tradition that would be relevant for every person. Bill Grimm, a missionary in Tokyo, wrote about it in an article for *La Croix*.³ The content of his text can be summarized as follows: the secular media, in particular *The New York Times* and a certain Tokyo daily, published articles by American and Japanese astronauts who had spent months on the orbit and were now giving practical advice to people on how to live in home confinement and find solutions to stressful situations on their own. These dailies took over the role of spiritual guides that the church could not take up, leading people to simple life and self-control. Where were monks and hermits? Where were church leaders with an offer of the experience these Christian masters of social distancing have acquired over the millennia? When a next crisis hits, is it going to be astronauts who provide a message of hope and spiritual guidance again? This is the provocative question Grimm asks.

An opportunity to see the Catholic condition more clearly

For me, and perhaps for many others too, the lockdown provided an opportunity to see the state of Catholicism as if from the outside. One of the best guarded as well as most fundamental doctrines in the Catholic Church is the doctrine of the Eucharist. The Eucharist is regarded as the most important means for Christian life without which there would in fact be no church. Much was written on this topic. To give but one example, Benedict XVI wrote in his Apostolic Exhortation “*Sacramentum Caritatis*” that the Eucharist is the Christ who gives himself to us, unceasingly forming us into his body. Therefore, there is a mysterious synergy between the Eucharist that constitutes the church and the church itself that realizes the Eucharist. As a result, the Eucharist is the foundation for the existence and ministry of the church.

This discourse appears to be theological but is, in fact, political as it confirms the status quo of power division in the church. The Eucharist is not only the foundation for the life of the church and the spiritual life of the Catholic believer. It is also the constitutive principle of the sharpest hierarchy in the Catholic Church, dividing it into those who are allowed to celebrate the Eucharist and those who are not. The Eucharist can only be celebrated by a specialist who is singled out for this purpose by a life-long ordination (we know, among other things, that it must be a male who is, by and large, celibate but this is the topic for another discussion).

This specialization constitutes a special, irreplaceable caste within the church that reserves the exclusive right to formulate orthodoxy and morality today and can secure an unwavering position for itself by enforcing a doctrine about the central role of the Eucharist in the life of the church. This is a systemic problem at the core of clericalism, at least its Catholic version (but that too would be the topic for another discussion). In the time when public worship services were banned, this specialization, robustly founded by

³ <https://international.la-croix.com/news/help-from-on-high/12424>

doctrine and carefully guarded through power structures, led to the most of the church being forced to believe that whenever they cannot attend the mass, they are cut off from Christ and the church that the Eucharist is to establish and realize.

This disproportional emphasis on the absolutization of the Eucharist in the spiritual life of the Catholic believer led to creating an unspoken consensus among the clergy and most laypeople that the most essential role of the clergy is to use any means possible to make sure that Catholics have access to this magical sacrament. The means to pursue it was the virtualization of worship services and the propagation of a controversial doctrine of spiritual communion or “eucharistic buffet.” Most Catholics were satisfied and gradually returned to the old ways after the churches had been reopened. I believe, therefore, that the pandemic experience will fade away without any effect and change.

Two concluding observations

In conclusion, I would like to reflect on two moments that I find interesting with regard to the experience of life without the Eucharist. The first that I wrote about is symbolic. It is ironic that the Eucharist became inaccessible for almost all Catholics in the year when the eucharistically saturated part of the global church sent a message to the Catholics of Amazonia, saying that the latter could do just well without the Eucharist and that the voluntarization of celibate for their local community leaders who were married would not be an option since priests are, purportedly, not necessary for the life of their church (the discipline of celibate is much more important). This is a very significant decision because the church hierarchy is thereby confirming, *inter alia*, that their outwardly theological discourse on the Eucharist is actually political; the message is that it is, in fact not about the Eucharist but about maintaining the status quo. When the status quo in Amazonia was to give way to the Eucharist, the church preferred reinforcing the status quo.

I personally viewed the life without the Eucharist in the period when public worship services were banned as an expression of obligatory solidarity with people in these parts of the world, and not only with them but with all those who are excluded from sacramental life because their familial situation does not correspond to the ideas the celibate episcopate holds on Christian marriage. That is the reason why the action by some clergy in the field of “crisis distribution” of the Eucharist went against my religious experiencing and I disliked it very much.

The second moment represents my prophetic visions as a theologian that I enjoyed during worship services at home and that I have not written about yet. Our worship services consisted of reading biblical texts according to the lectionary, choral readings of psalms, and agape feasts with plain bread and tea brewed by our children or freshly squeezed orange juice. We laid an emphasis on equality. Everyone would participate in reading texts and everyone could comment on the readings in any way (so, effectively, everyone would be allowed to preach).

We did not celebrate the Eucharist. Perhaps we are not such a pious family so we do not need the Eucharist so often, and nobody requested it either. On the other hand, having made this experience, I cannot let go of the utopic dream that a day will come when the hierarchy does not forbid Christians to celebrate the Eucharist, preventing them from making arrangements. In this utopic dream, I even glimpsed a far-away future when Christians will not indulge in regulations and bans but will enjoy celebrating a Christian bar micvah and bat micvah with an adolescent son or daughter entitled to minister *in persona Christi* for the first time (if they are interested). After all, Jesus was still quite young when participating in the Last Supper. By the way, he died at the same age as Bruce Lee.