

# The Church in the Quarantine: A Harsh Wakeup Call as *Kairos*, or Another Wasted Opportunity?

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The spring of 2020 crises and events associated with the pandemic disclosed a series of trends in various spheres of life, accelerating some of them. Churches and religious life represent no exception. While we might not like the basic message of the covid-19 crisis, it opens up a great opportunity for us through its urgency.

## Gradual fading

Long-term trends have not changed much in the past 250 years. On the one hand, society is becoming more and more secularized in the sense of decline of declaratory Christianity. Even though this process started already in the 18th century, it has been coming to its climax at the symbolic level especially in the recent decades. On the other hand, the western society is, paradoxically, becoming much more Christian in many aspects of life, even when compared to the idealized Middle and Modern Ages. This especially concerns the values that are lived and accepted in the society. This leads one to reflect on what Christianization means actually. Historically, the main aims of ecclesial endeavors were evangelization in the sense of recruiting new believers and the deepening of Christianization as the blending of Christian values, patterns of behavior, and doctrine into the society's thinking and life-style. In case of the values, such as human dignity or communal solidarity, this pursuit has by and large been successful. Despite all historical achievements, the Catholic Church as well as other mainline churches and communities have been facing a continuous decrease of believers, that is, those who self-identify as such and actively live within ecclesial structures. It is especially painful for believers to experience the inability to transmit religious practice across generations.

A growing number of believers come to recognize the trend of the accelerated fading of ecclesial Christianity. After all, the names of the books, such as *Gott funktioniert nicht: Deswegen glaube ich an ihn* (God Does not Work: Therefore I Believer in Him) or *Aus, Amen, Ende? So kann ich nicht mehr Pfarrer sein* (Out, Amen, the End? I Can't Go on Being a Pastor Like This) by pastorally very successful, yet frustrated priest Thomas Frings are very clear about it. Western churches, for all their modern tools and funds, a plenty of skilled people, erudite theologians, and the ability to facilitate an open internal discussion, are not capable of inhibiting, not to say reversing these trends. The covid-19 crisis highlighted these trends, shattering the naïve ideas about the sustainability or renewal of the influence of traditional churches in society. Virtually in all countries were the interests and needs of churches as institutions markedly overshadowed; they were completely, or almost completely, forgotten. Anecdotally, it was explicitly voiced in a statement by Czech prime minister Andrej Babiš, whereas the (then) minister of health in his government was a graduate of a Catholic high school in České Budějovice.<sup>1</sup> For churches, this is a moment when they can realize the actual situation,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://denikn.cz/341179/vlada-pri-uvolnovani-restrikci-zapomnela-na-cirkve-duka-chce-kostely-otvirat-postupne/>

their own authority and influence. It is a moment of a harsh but much needed sobering up, a stirring moment of conversion.

### **A harsh wakeup call**

German Protestant theologian Günther Thomas suggests that during the pandemic Baumarkt stores (a German like of Target) were more important for the government than worship services; at the European level, churches were not worthy a mention from either politicians or scientists. However, he maintains they should not feel sorry for themselves, self-positioning as victims. When they identify vis-à-vis the political sphere as a socially significant and charitable group that, first and foremost, acts as a moral agency through its youth and senior organizations, they of course have a certain social value but certainly are not indispensable. He asserts that the pandemic has become a nail in the coffin of a public theology that, following the advice of Jürgen Habermas, struggled to translate for the public the distant talk of God into a terminology of moral orientation. What Thomas felt local church leaders failed to do was talking about God as their primary task, even if running a risk of mockery or failure. What was missing was a word of hope that comforts, liberates, and encourages. Missing was a courageous spiritual-theological orientation that local church leaders were to offer during the pandemic in which they would voice what no one else can offer, namely, that even as Christians we are afflicted but not forsaken by God, and we therefore have a hope and trust.<sup>2</sup>

In their effort to be recognized for their significance, the European churches have become insignificant. And this has also found its symbolic expression. In eastern Germany, some no longer used and superfluous churches have now been turned into columbaria.<sup>3</sup> In Italy, during the pandemic, churches were commonly used as morgues which seems to be, given the extent and self-evidence, a historically new phenomenon. In the Seven Weeks' War (1866), churches were first and foremost used as provisional military hospitals. If Nietzsche referred to churches as graves of a dead God, empty churches, or churches used as columbaria and morgues, can be defined as graves of the dead church, or, more precisely, of a certain form of church life and structure. What harsher wakeup call do churches need? Can there be a clearer impulse and appeal to move away from spatial thinking than that to radically resign the effort to maintain and conquer the institutional, societal, and political space and to forget the pursuit of self-affirmation through wealth, political influence, and connections? Can there be any greater appeal to go straight to the core – the spiritual and religious core of the mission of the church?

What does it mean? Researcher and journalist Mathias Horx spoke of the coronavirus as a herald from the future, summoning us to change our ways. Our civilization has become too condensed and it proceeds at a too rapid pace. For the message to be heard, it is necessary that the society become more considerate, responsible, sympathetic, and aware of its interdependence; it needs more joy and authentic communication.<sup>4</sup> Nothing of these problematic trends concerns

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<sup>2</sup> Günther Thomas, Sind die Kirche nicht systemrelevant? *Idea Spektrum* 28.5.2020.

<https://www.idea.de/spektrum/detail/sind-die-kirchen-nicht-systemrelevant-113110.html>

<sup>3</sup> On the situation in the former GDR, see, in Czech, the whole thematic issue of *Revue Salve* 1/2019, <https://salve.op.cz/archiv/vychodni-nemecko>.

<sup>4</sup> Mathias Horx, *Die Zukunft nach Corona: Wie eine Krise die Gesellschaft, unser Denken und unser Handeln verändert* (Düsseldorf, 2020).

mainline churches; they have exactly opposite problems. The values that Horx mentions as an antidote to the civilizational problems are even fundamentally Christian values. Who else should and can offer them if not the churches? The churches that should naturally embody and radiate them rather than nervously, even neurotically fight for being recognized for their social and political relevance. To be honest, can anything be changed by a formal inclusion in the EU constitution of a reference to Christianity? Or the glorious “victory” over the efforts to ratify the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence?

### **How can one religiously act as Christian in a time of crisis?**

Pope Francis showed one possible way. He honored physicians, medical workers, and shop assistants, showing solidarity with the most afflicted countries and regions. He pointed out that the pandemic is a consequence of our ill treatment of nature that, unlike God and humans, never forgives. He did not succumb to the temptation to mock the modern veneration of science on the account of its not knowing crucial things and not being able to protect us. On the contrary, he distanced himself from those who interpreted the pandemic as God’s punishment; from the prophets of doom and panic. In the realm of religious life, he was like the good owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old, comforting others through his words, deeds, and symbolic gestures. The pope gave two extraordinary benedictions. The first one was in the midst of the deepest crisis on March 16, 2020 and was aptly described by Norbert Schmidt as follows: “A fragile old man is standing alone on a deserted square, giving an expression to our own feelings. An ancient Oriental story from an obscure Roman province reflects on plasma TVs the heavy situation of an infected late digital modern age... Against the despair of an omnipresent menace, there is not a doctor in a white cloak but rather a man of prayer, embodying the most vulnerable group of people with the highest mortality rate. In front of the facade of a temple as a symbol of the power and influence of the Catholic Church and papacy, the lone pope unprecedentedly and with the highest humility speaks about mercy freely distributed to all without difference... Against the impacts of the globalization, here is the Roman pontifex, a bridge builder, as their embodiment and antipole at the same time. The old bridge builder who strives to overcome our diseased loneliness in our interconnected world.”<sup>5</sup>

What a contrast! In contrast to the usually overcrowded square with the Swiss Guard, the Carabinieri, a brass band, and all of that pious folk-lore, the square is now impressively vacant during these simple *urbi et orbi* benedictions, with only the age-old symbols of Christian faith: an ancient Marian image and a medieval cross (being the *Salus populi Romani* icon of Santa Maria Maggiore on the pope’s right and the Saint Marcel cross on his left) that had helped the citizens of the Eternal City to overcome plague epidemics in previous centuries. The speech included: *Fears and constraints weighed heavily on us. Like the disciples in the gospel, we found ourselves amidst an unexpected and fierce storm. We realized that we all are in the same boat, vulnerable and disoriented. (...) Like the disciples who cried out with one voice in their distress, saying “We are perishing!,” we also noticed that we cannot continue on our own, each for him or herself, but only together. (...) The storm unmasks our vulnerability and discloses the false and superficial certainties on which we have built our programs and plans, our habits*

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<sup>5</sup> See <https://vltava.rozhlas.cz/norbert-schmidt-sam-na-namesti-8182470>.

*and priorities. (...) The Lord calls us amidst the storm to wake up and activate our solidarity and hope that can anchor, support, and give a meaning to these moments when everything seems to be coming to naught.*

Pope Francis succeeded in going to the core of Christian faith, intelligibly passing on the essential hope rooted in the historical tradition of the church, and bringing comfort: There is a disastrous pandemic but we have had historical experiences with situations like this; we can overcome it as we have done it before, even when we did not have such means at our disposal as we have today. Fear not!

### **The challenges of the pandemic**

Not only Pope Francis but also many other church representatives were very cautious with regard to broadcasting of worship services as they refused to turn it into daily business. Rather, they accentuated the notion of crisis as a time of silence and introspection, as an opportunity to reflect, to deeply think about what carries us spiritually, what is authentic and what could be changed in the church. Gerhard Feige, bishop of Magdeburg, criticized the concept of participation-limited worship services via digital logging in which only the healthy and strong could participate in and “digital people” would be given preferential treatment over “analog people.” He expressed doubts whether such sterile worship services could truly uplift the spirit, comfort, and speak to people.

Defending the long-gone model of the functioning of the church and spatial thinking we exhaust ourselves in vain, as visible from the arguments in the Trier diocese on the reduction of the number of parishes and the establishment of mega-parishes due to the lack of priests. Here, the believers appealed to the Vatican against the decision, achieving a suspension of the planned reform. Logically, there is then a lack of energy, inner peace, and time to search for new forms of church life; to listen to God talking to us; to open space for the Holy Spirit that would be, humanly speaking, transformed into a search for new ways and trendsetting. The pandemic-related crisis again showed the need to diversify and discover new forms of religious and spiritual life and new forms of liturgy. As the pandemic reasserted us, the solution certainly does not lie in returning to “retro-Catholicism with its neo-magic,” as theologian Julia Knop pertinently captured various quasi-pious attempts to chase the pandemic away by sprinkling with holy water and blessing monstrance and reliquaries from airplanes and cars passing by.

### **The illusion of alliance**

Unfortunately, some other church leaders have given a very different image during the pandemic. Rather than reflecting on the impacts of the pandemic and searching for new forms of religious life, for example, by using the experience with worship services at home, a part of the Czech church has succumbed to temptation of becoming an influential lobby group, getting tapped into governmental circles and making advances to populist conservative movements. The election to the Czech Television Council of Hana Lipovská, a nominee of the Czech Bishops' Conference, was most vocally celebrated on social networks by Archbishop Dominik Duka, hard Eurosceptic and anti-immigration parties SPD and Trikolóra, and the Communist Party. Not only is this alliance strange and compromising for the Archbishop of Prague, it

especially shows how absolutely ineffective and even embarrassing this strategy is. All of those parties in the parliament supported the bill in favor of taxing the financial compensation for the church restitutions. Like in the 19th century, a part of the Czech church leadership let themselves be taken advantage of by political powers to defend the political status quo and to be involved in culture wars. The chair elect of the Czech Bishops' Conference defined in a "program interview" for *Konzervativní noviny* (Conservative Newspaper) one of the main tasks to defend ourselves against "pernicious ideologies" from the West.<sup>6</sup> The preference by a part of the Czech church leaders for the identitarian media as privileged channels of communication, over usual church and mainline newspapers and magazines or church and public TV channels, speaks volumes. Similarly, very telling is the inclination of many conservative Catholics to support the Trikolóra movement that self-identifies as a new, ideologically firmer, and especially fiercer Christian-democratic People's Party.

Many Catholics, including bishops and other elites, regard Christianity as an identitarian ideology and a conservative political and social power. Playing this card may perhaps for a few more years serve as a driving and identity-making force but it certainly cannot either represent or replace the required profound transformation. The time "won" through this process will be paid for dearly by the loss of elementary credibility and authenticity. Also, sticking with the powerful makes sense on the face of it. While the pandemic has fully exposed the weakness of ecclesial Christianity, the state as an institution has been reinforced and regained credibility previously tainted by neoliberal criticism in the recent decades. For the churches, however, this represents a blind alley, a step backward.

It is a historical paradox that these conservative Catholics struggle to defend the world whose creation they opposed just as stubbornly in the 19th century. The world founded on individualistic liberalism, the market-driven world based on competition and eliminating any links between the state and the citizen, the nation state, nationalism, all-embracing economic thinking obsessed with an idea of monetarily expressible performance and effectiveness – all of these were not so long ago rejected by church representatives on principle. Now, however, they distance themselves from those who strive to change these patterns of thinking and behavior.

A significant part of church leaders lacks an authentic eschatological perspective, a perception of historicity, and the penultimate nature of the church and the whole world as well as their orientation toward the ultimate consummation. Although they profess with their mouths that the churches are led by the Holy Spirit and that God holds in God's hands the history of humankind, they in fact advise not to venture at major endeavors but rather stick with the tried-and-tested certainties – just to be on the safe side. A pastoral letter which is addressed to priests on the eve of Sts. Peter and Paul feast and whose main message calls on to priests to recommend to believers a church-owned guesthouse, speaks for itself.<sup>7</sup> The western society suffers from a decade-long pandemic of loneliness,<sup>8</sup> hopelessness, despair, nihilism, cynicism,<sup>9</sup> and superficial economic pragmatism more than from the covid-19 pandemic. The badly needed

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<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.konzervativninoviny.cz/vuci-neomarxismu-mame-vetsi-imunitu/>.

<sup>7</sup> See [http://www.christnet.eu/clanky/6425/abychom\\_zacali\\_fungovat\\_jako\\_rodina.url](http://www.christnet.eu/clanky/6425/abychom_zacali_fungovat_jako_rodina.url).

<sup>8</sup> Manfred Spitzer, *Einsamkeit. Die unerkannte Krankheit: schmerzhaft, ansteckend, tödlich* (München, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> For example, Werner Schneiders, *Die Globalisierung des Nihilismus* (Freiburg, 2019).

remedy can never be a self-centered religious organization, and even less so an alliance with the political parties that openly mock the values, such as truth and love.

What is needed is spontaneous self-help and cooperation, the sewing of face masks, and assistance to elderly fellow citizens, pursued together by believers and “nonbelievers.” Such initiatives have shown that contemporary society certainly is not hopeless but is in need of orientation and witness, role models and examples; it longs for hope and meaning.

Sociologically and psychologically speaking, the time of quarantine and intense experience with the pandemic was probably too short to significantly permeate our mindset and make us change our behavior. However, who else, if not Christians, should be able to perceive and read the signs of the times and be ready for transformation? After the outputs from the Amazon Synod were published, Pope Francis had to face a storm of criticism over the fact that his reformatory efforts have slowed down or even halted. However, the pandemic has shown that the emphasis on the content and form of his messages are even more important than structural and institutional reforms. This is evident, for instance, in the fact that one is called to think and act globally, that is, generously, in the global world. This is what Pope Francis did in a common prayer with leaders from many religions on May 14, 2020.

*“We are all brothers and sisters. St Francis of Assisi used to say: ‘All brothers and sisters.’ And so, men and women of every religious confession are uniting themselves today in prayer and penance to ask for the grace of healing from this pandemic.*

*(...) We were not expecting this pandemic, it came without us expecting it, but now it is here. And many people are dying. Many people are dying alone and many people are dying without being able to do anything. (...) Think about the tragedy and its consequences on the economy and education, the consequences ... that will come afterwards. And it is for this that today, everyone, brothers and sisters, of whatever religious confession, are praying to God. Perhaps someone will say: ‘This is religious relativism and you cannot do that.’ But how can we not pray to the Father of all? Everyone prays as they know how, as they can, according to what they have received from their own culture. We are not praying against each other, this religious tradition against that one, no! We are all united as human beings, as brothers and sisters, praying to God according to each one’s culture, according to each one’s own tradition, according to each one’s own beliefs, but brothers and sisters praying to God, this is what is important! Brothers and sisters, fasting, asking God to forgive our sins, so that the Lord might have mercy on us, so that the Lord will forgive us, so that the Lord may end this pandemic. Today is a day of fraternity, looking to the one Father: brothers and sisters and paternity.*

*(...) May God put an end to this tragedy, may He stop this pandemic. May God have mercy on us and may He also put a stop to the other terrible pandemics of hunger, war, and uneducated children. This is what we ask as brothers and sisters, all together.”<sup>10</sup>*

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<sup>10</sup> Pope Francis, Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis “Day of Fraternity, Day of Penance and Prayer,” May 14, 2020, online [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2020/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie\\_20200514\\_giornodi-fratellanza-penitenza-preghiera.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2020/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie_20200514_giornodi-fratellanza-penitenza-preghiera.html).