



I am writing this the day after the Prime Minister announced new rules for social distancing.

As long as I have been a priest I have never been comfortable with the idea of celebrating Mass on my own. In a rural Parish without a daily Mass (there is Mass three times during the week) I don't celebrate on two days out of seven. When I am on holiday I don't usually celebrate at all as a priest. I go to Mass and on Sundays when I am with the family in Italy I concelebrate with the local priest. Occasionally in the summer I have supplied for him too. I love the Italian version of the Mass.

I know lots of priests do celebrate on their own, some maybe even in good old Don Camillo style out of a suitcase. Some I am sure for the sake of their spiritual life wish to celebrate every day, something highly commended by the Church.

However, the Missal assumes that at every celebration there will be at least one other person present. The Church says we should not celebrate alone except for grave cause. So, I always thought, I have no business saying *The Lord be with you* if there is nobody to say *And with your spirit*. It's *our* Mass, I have always thought, not just 'my' Mass. The prayers are spoken in the first person plural. And personally, I appreciate the regular 'fast' I have from the Eucharistic celebration. I come back refreshed.

But now we have 'grave cause.' The Corona Virus has meant the suspension of all public worship. Our bishops have said that priests will celebrate Mass on their own. There is a lot of livestreaming of Mass. I told parishioners where I am that on Sundays, if the Lord spares me, I will be at the altar at 0930, our usual hour of Mass.

A parishioner welcomed this. When I demurred about solitary Mass, he reminded me that I am not alone. 'You're here for us, Father.' So even on my own, I am still doing this *for* them, and there are ways in which I can do it, albeit remotely, *with* them. They can still join me 'in spirit.' It is one option, particularly for those who don't have internet.

So last Sunday, the Fourth of Lent, I did everything exactly as I would normally with no short cuts. I prepared the altar properly. I put the vestments on. I celebrated the Mass. True, I was facing an empty Church, but though I couldn't hear the responses, I trusted they were out there somewhere. I even sang my bits. I didn't preach, they had that in a little newsletter I hope to e-mail each week with a homily, some intercession biddings, the text of the Preface and some material for making a 'spiritual communion.'

I prayed the Roman Canon. I have always admired its practicality. It is a homely prayer. Basically, it is a 'roll call:' 'Here we go, people. We give thanks. We offer. We offer with X, Y, Z. We offer because Jesus did,' and so on. Church, Pope, Bishop, those present, the Saints, the dead, us sinner/ministers, more saints; all are named, all present and correct (at least as far as we sinners can be), and all are being taken up to the heavenly altar by the hands of the Holy Angel. Normally, I find the Canon in our 'new' version exhausting: a bit long for frequent out-loud speaking. The Canon trots along much better in its original Latin or in the 16th century English version by Miles Coverdale which is more or less what the Ordinariate Missal uses.

People said that they will take time out with their missals at half past nine on Sunday mornings. They will read the readings, pray some of the prayers, remember that Jesus promises to be with his disciples all time, and remember what I am doing in Church. We are linked in invisible ways. We are linked, albeit non-sacramentally, in Christ.

This may be an unpopular thing to write, but I wonder if our many years of 'active participation' have meant that we have forgotten about the need to unite ourselves interiorly with the Rite. We are used to the standing and sitting/kneeling, the songs and responses and the newsletter during the homily (sorry!) and maybe that has obscured the goal to which exterior participation should lead, namely, full and conscious as well as active, a contemplative sharing in the liturgical Mystery of Christ's Passover.

Over the years watching people at Mass, it has often seemed to me that parents sort of leave their children to their own devices, expecting perhaps that they will 'pick it up.' The evidence suggests that they don't, and that in fact the boredom of which so many young people complain begins very early on in their conscious experience of Mass-going. It's not enough just to 'join in.' We have not sounded the depths, which only yield to contemplation.

Mass on my own was an odd experience. I wouldn't want it to be the 'new normal.' But it is. Will things get back to old 'normal'? Our Church will have changed. For many, a habit of Mass going will have gone. And sadly, we shall have lost some 'pillars of the Parish.'

However, I want to exercise the virtue of hope. Just as those who fast come hungrier to the feast, I pray that some people at least will come back to Mass with a deepened sense of what is the Mystery of it and how we engage, *both* actively and interiorly with that Mystery. We are in the Lord's hands.