

## Would Public Celebration of the Holy Mass Make Things Worse...or Better?

A Note to Friends Upon Cancellation of Public Participation in the Holy Mass (April 5, 2020)

I have heard many Catholics who express love for the faith share their views on the widespread cancelling of the public celebration of the Holy Mass in response to the Chinese virus pandemic. I have heard some say that it is a good idea to help contain contagion and others lament the loss of reception of the Most Blessed Sacrament, for others as well as themselves. What is not said is sometimes as important as what is said. With that in mind, I would like to share my thoughts on this subject. I am not suggesting that priests defy their bishops' orders. The decision to restore public celebration of the Holy Mass rests with the bishops.

In summary—

If having the laity continue to assist in the offering of Our Lord's sacrifice in the Divine Liturgy would have made things better during the pandemic we should have continued with public celebration of the Holy Mass. If it would have made things worse we should have stayed home during the pandemic.

It is my belief that continued public celebration of the Holy Mass during the pandemic would have made things better.

### **Why *should* the laity go to Holy Mass (in general)?**

The simple answer is to praise God and to promote good for others and for ourselves...in that order. These purposes are encapsulated when the priest says to the congregation, "Pray brethren that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father." That direction from the priest is a *command* (orate) as opposed to the invitation, "Let us pray (oremus). Although it is a simple duty for the congregation to perform, it is an important duty.

The congregation responds by saying, "May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands for the praise and glory of his name, for our good and the good of all his holy Church." If done properly, with proper disposition the congregation is fulfilling what they have been directed to do. With our prayers we are making the *offering* of Our Lord's sacrifice *better*. We are not making His sacrifice better. His sacrifice is infinitely good without us. We can only affect mankind's offering of that sacrifice. This is why we should attend Holy Mass on Sunday even if we cannot receive Holy Communion for some reason, such as not meeting the fasting requirement.

God is substantially more praised by each Holy Mass than if we just prayed, because our praise is tied to *the* infinite sacrifice. That is important.

The grace available by the offering of that sacrifice is greater than what would be available if that particular offering was not made. That means more actual grace is provided by God, grace that calls sinners to repentance, calls non-Catholics to become Catholic, calls faithful Catholics to greater holiness, and makes the efforts of evangelists more effective.

God's response (if it is best for the world) would be to answer more of our petitions. People will be healed, souls will be released from Purgatory...and so much more.

If we cease to celebrate the Holy Mass publicly we will lose whatever good God grants us because of the inclusion of the prayers of the laity.

### **Why should we cancel public celebration of the Holy Mass?**

Obviously, we should cancel public celebration of the Holy Mass if having the celebration will cause more harm than good. If we believe that having the laity participate in the offering of Our Lord's sacrifice will result in an increased spread of contagion and not result in some greater good everyone should stay home.

If that is true, then the laity's participation *never* had much value.

I don't believe that. It makes no sense. I admit that such a perspective made sense to me before I became Catholic.

### **A Personal Note**

Many of you know that my late wife, Cyndi, passed away in 2010 after a battle with cancer. During much of her last year her immune system was compromised. She was no risk to anyone else. Even with her compromised immune system, neither of us considered that she would be better off missing church. As her disease spread to her lungs she needed to either use an oxygen tank or an oxygen concentrator (when home). One Sunday she was having particular trouble breathing on the portable oxygen tank and I suggested that she stay home. She was certainly dispensed from the Sunday obligation. She decided to go. On the way to church, Cyndi said that we had to turn back because she was struggling greatly to breathe. We went home, but I remember telling the children, "When you get older and you're thinking about skipping church remember what it took to get your mother to miss church on Sunday...no air."

I know that if people have duties that conflict with attending Holy Mass or are ill or contagious they should stay home. If you suspect that you're contagious, you know you are bringing risk to others and that is opposed to good will. Everyone choosing to go recognizes that there is some risk of contracting an illness from someone who may be sick, but doesn't realize it.

### **The Example of the Mexican Martyrs**

Years ago, I read an article in the Knights of Columbus magazine about the persecution of Catholics in Mexico early in the last century. The article told how a group of Catholics snuck out into the woods to illegally (by the government) celebrate the Holy Mass. They knew that if they were discovered they could be killed...the men, the women, and the children. They were discovered and faced death. The priest begged the soldiers to allow him to finish celebrating the Holy Mass before killing everyone. They did. The only people left to tell the story were the soldiers. Were the Catholics wrong to sneak into the woods? Would they have been better off staying home?

The bishops were presented with the question, “What action will result in the most good, the laity being able to participate in the offering of Our Lord’s sacrifice OR people being protected from the spread of disease that may occur during the offering of Our Lord’s sacrifice?” Both actions present potential benefits and potential harm.

I certainly think that the bishops should have dispensed the Sunday obligation. Only those wishing to accept the risk should go. I also think that the Mexican bishops (above) should have dispensed the Sunday obligation when the death penalty was a real threat.

## **Yesterday’s Gospel**

I noticed an interesting parallel in yesterday’s (April 4) Gospel reading - <http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/040420.cfm>

The Jewish leaders realized that Jesus was performing great signs after the raising of Lazarus. They also believed, “If we leave him alone, all will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our land and our nation.” They needed a *solution* to prevent the suffering that would *obviously* occur if people went to Jesus. The only way of stopping Jesus was to kill Him. “So from that day on they planned to kill him. So Jesus no longer walked about in public among the Jews...” When the religious leaders decided to take Our Lord away from everyone, Our Lord walked away.

Today, we need a *solution* to prevent the spread of contagion that will *obviously* occur if we congregate together in our churches. One solution is to move away from God. Another solution is to move closer.

## **The Father of All Lies**

A Protestant evangelist, Dr. Ravi Zacharias, told the story of Phong Hin, a man he had worked with in South Vietnam during the Vietnam War. When the American evangelists were expelled from South Vietnam, their Vietnamese counterparts were left behind and many were imprisoned. Phong Hin spent years in prison being brainwashed. He eventually began to succumb until he saw a page from chapter 8 of St. Paul’s *Letter to the Romans* in the latrine. Someone was using Sacred Scripture as toilet paper.

<http://www.usccb.org/bible/romans/8>

He read the passages and his faith was strengthened. He then asked for latrine duty and over the course of a week was able to put together the entire epistle. The commandant was so impressed that he agreed to release Phong Hin if he would deny being a Christian. He refused. He let him go anyway. But there was more...

Upon return to society Phong Hin’s health was degraded and he had become an outcast. Along with about 50 other people he made plans to leave Vietnam in a boat. Shortly before leaving he was accosted by three policemen who wanted to know if he was part of a group planning to sneak out of Vietnam in a boat. If he told the truth he would be arrested and his friends would be in greater peril. He lied.

Upon returning home, he felt that he had betrayed God by lying. He begged God to forgive him and promised to never lie again even if it meant he would die in Vietnam. The next day the three policemen accosted him again. They asked him the same question...again. This time Phong Hin told the truth. It was all over. But it wasn't. The policemen responded, "Take us with you." They did.

The boat experienced some bad weather while at sea and was in danger of sinking. The policemen were only people healthy enough to pilot the boat through the storm. If he had followed human wisdom Phong Hin would have avoided arrest, but he would have faced the storm with less aid.

Last I heard, Phong Hin was living in Texas.

God may help us even if we trust Him less, but will He really help us less if we trust Him more?

### **Why did I write this note?**

The actions by our bishops communicate that we are better off *not* participating in the Holy Mass. They communicate that our participation in the Holy Mass is not of sufficient value at this time to continue it.

I wrote this note to communicate the opposite message. The offering of Our Lord's sacrifice is of immense value, because His sacrifice is of immense value and God has given us the command to offer it.