

Discovering the church in a time of social distancing.

We all regret the need to close the churches, but most of us, I suppose, recognise that for the foreseeable future there is no acceptable alternative. So it is surprising to note the number of letters addressed to The Tablet expressing a sort of disgust that, even though it not feasible to celebrate the Eucharist in them, the churches are not left open 'for private prayer'.

It seems that, for some of us at least, this closure represents a challenge to our ordinary way of thinking about things because it leads us to ask 'Why do we take for granted so many of the things we do take for granted?' And the answer to this question is nearly always 'because of history'.

It is almost two thousand years since the teachings of Jesus Christ were recorded in the New Testament, and we need to go back sometimes to judge whether or not our current habits and practices really reveal what it was that our forefathers held as essential to the 'Way' that Christ gave us. Basically this is what the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) was all about. John XXIII's unique insight and charisma combined with the

brilliance of a generation of French and other Northern European theologians, whose thought had developed against the catastrophic background of the Second World War, had a profound influence on the assembled bishops. It led them to vote overwhelmingly for renewal in the light of the New Testament and the early Fathers of the Church. But how far did the splendid vision of Vatican II ever get translated into the convictions and day-to-day practice of the Church in more recent times?

Perhaps we shouldn't linger over this question, but simply rejoice in the fact that fifty years later the Spirit moved again and a former Jesuit superior from Argentina was elected bishop of Rome. Francis was, and is, determined to accomplish a series of changes which would bring about a Church nearer to the vision of Vatican II and, needless to say, of the Gospel,

Vatican II speaks of the Church primarily as 'The People of God'. More explicitly the Church is the People of God in communion with the risen Christ. The Church can be present anywhere, anytime: in a baroque building in Rome, in a gothic building in Canterbury; in a prison-camp in Burma or in Armley gaol. The earliest recorded instances of Church-assembly were in a tavern at Emmaus and on the beach at Tiberias. Jesus was present at both

eucharistic memorials but buildings didn't matter so far as the eucharist is concerned. But what about the claim that we need churches 'for private prayer'? Jesus himself prayed in all sorts of places. He also advised his disciples to 'go to your private room, shut yourself in, and pray to your Father who is in that secret place (Matt 6:6).' So to go to a place of Church-assemblies to pray in private is not really sensible, let alone necessary.

How, then, do we discover the Church in a time of social distancing? We discover it by accepting that the Church is ALL the People of God in communion with the risen Christ, all those of us, Christians of the first or the twenty-first century who affirm the Apostles' creed in any part of the world. Even when we are obliged to suspend our celebrations of the Eucharist with a given congregation in a given church-building, we are still at one with the Pilgrim Church in its journey through the ages towards the Kingdom of God. And that is the context of all our prayer, and our reason for employing all those means of communication with which we are blessed today to make the bond of union with the risen Christ more tangible to the People of God.

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