

**TEACHING AT THE TIME OF COVID-19. COMPARING EXPERIENCES,
LOOKING TO THE FUTURE**

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It's remarkable how a few months can make a difference to how we see the world and how our lives have now changed. One could see in this pandemic an invitation to the faithful to go deep – to enter our contemplative cell, albeit in a corner of our homes where we can listen to the voice of God, we can meet the living Christ deep within our hearts and allow the Spirit to work, where we can allow God to draw us to himself. It's an opportunity for us to live as contemplatives in the world – taking advantage of the slower pace, quieter streets and fewer people in and around our daily lives. The fruits of this contemplative moment in our life will come to bear in our teaching and engagement with students – for we have remained grafted to the vine (John 15:5). I start with this reference to prayer for this must be our starting point in discerning the way forward for our profession, for our students – and particularly those who have suffered most in this pandemic – most certainly those who are marginalised and who don't have access to basic resources.

The institutional Church has offered us on-line services such as the Rosary, novenas, daily Mass from various parishes and monasteries. In private our priests and bishops pray for their people and provide pastoral care through the telephone and emails. We see here that ecclesiology is not exempt from reality – the Church is not exempt from the impact of the corona virus. This was most apparent in Pope Francis prayer in an empty St Peter's Square. There were and are no synods, public audiences, large group liturgies. In some ways, the empty St Peter's square has brought and shows the loneliness of the Papacy. Yet prayer, Christ amongst us, the Word of God, the living of our faith unites the Pope and bishops with their people – physically absent yet present in their hearts.

The rise of virtualisation, of social media outputs on what it means to be Catholic risks emphasis on an idol – that we can do without others as we worship. Mass through our television screen or laptop is not the same as attending Mass, the absence of the people in the celebration of the sacraments is not the same as the priest saying Mass on his own. Abstinence and imposed fasting from the sacraments reveal how hungry we are for signs, symbols and sacred spaces – those things that signify the physicality of the resurrection. This abstinence accentuates our hunger for the unique and grace filled gift of the Eucharist. We, as a community of believers, need to reflect on this, we need to talk about it and discern because for some the loss is felt acutely, yet for some perhaps virtualisation fits comfortably into a busy schedule, or housebound life. Instruction is needed from our leaders in this most unusual and unprecedented time. I stress this because boundaries can be blurred as to who is in charge – it's less obvious at the moment. There are science experts, legislative powers, special advisors, political regimes, health experts...and amidst the cacophony of voices the faithful ask their priests 'when will our Church open?' When can I attend Mass? A revisiting of the role of the priest, the role of the laity, the sacredness of the sabbath, the unique gift of the Eucharist and the sacramental life of the faithful may be needed stressing that Christ's real presence in the gathering of the community, in the Liturgy of the Word and in the sacrament - a renewed recognition that Christ speaks breaks bread and shares the cup. Yet we cannot underestimate the work of the spirit in the life of the faithful who quietly pray in their homes – dig deep into their hearts and grow in the Lord. The fruits of this contemplative engagement will accompany them as they return to our Churches

Schools also have offered on-line provision, on-line tasks and activities – a virtualisation of classroom and school learning. Parents have taken on the role of teacher and tried to engage in home schooling. For many this has caused some stress, anxiety and concern for the educational progress of their children. Yet a teacher without students, an empty classroom and computer screen is not the same as a dynamic learning environment with students physically present and interacting. A virtual presence is no substitute for the embodied presence. As we engage with virtual liturgies and prayer services, we experience the limitations and the loss of collective and community, so do our children – for they miss their friends, their teachers and the collective learning and growth. As we never anticipated closed and empty church buildings, we never anticipated empty and closed classrooms – our assumptive world expected those institutions and activities we hold most dear to always be available to us – grounding us, reassuring us and inspiring us.

Abstinence from the sacramental life and gathering of the community has also highlighted a potential consumerist view of the sacraments that is perhaps more prevalent in the West – “*I can receive the sacraments whenever I want*”. The arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic saw our assumption reprimanded, and while we grieve the loss, there’s an opportunity to appreciate that which we have taken for granted. Whilst our time of fasting continues, we think about and plan for the future – post virus, post lockdown. When our assumptive world has been challenged, we may or may not enter smoothly and swiftly into life as it was before. Likewise in education, the pandemic has thrown into question our assumptions about the role of schools – for the education of our young? A childcare facility while the adults work? Is it a necessary institution to serve the economy? Or are we rediscovering the joy of learning – of schools are places for human growth.

Loss of the assumptive world is a well-known phrase in the field of Grief, Loss and Bereavement whereby the way we see, the assumptions we make about our world, how we expect the world to be is somehow violated and does not fit the situation we now find ourselves. When our assumptions no longer fit then we grieve the world as we once knew it. Grief then is an all-encompassing experience that may include death of a loved one, but it can include all the types of losses we observe in this pandemic. Examples include loss of certainty, financial losses, insecurities about work, loss of daily routine through working at home, home schooling; we cannot connect in the same way with the people who are part of our lives – bringing instead potential isolation. Our loss experiences can be disenfranchised because the loss is subjective to the person – Grief is not the result of an absence of familiar routine /or separation from friends and family, and our parish; rather grief is our response to the loss, no matter what the cause. We need to be mindful of this as we look towards tomorrow for instead of validating the event of Covid-19, we need to validate the subjective appraisal of what has and is happening in the person experiencing it. Death and non-death losses are affecting people now - our teachers, our students, our clergy, our communities

Pandemics are not new to humanity – we have lived one pandemic after another in the story of the human race. The generations before us have lived through such losses, trauma and uncertainty – often the outcome is resilience. As a species we live and emerge, and our stories come with us.

Now as lockdown restrictions ease, we move forward with some new assumptions, perhaps they include living life individually and collectively with a deeper awareness that unexpected things happen. The typical response is resilience – the ability to absorb this experience, make

sense of it, take meaning from it and move forward – albeit there is a process to go through. Ofcourse those who are disproportionately affected by loss and the pandemic are those who are marginalised or who don't have access to basic resources.

What is the focus of our learning and teaching amidst and post Covid-19? A revisiting of a key feature of emotional and spiritual wellbeing – *“I may not be able to control what is happening around me, but I can control how I choose to respond in this moment”*. The illusion that life is predictable or controllable is exposed – our students can learn from us and from this experience that life is about change, challenge, threat, growth. The realisation that life is impermanent brings a dynamic dimension to living, Psycho-social educational programmes will play an important part as children and young people return to school with an emphasis on surviving through and thriving forward. Yet for the Catholic educator, we thrive forward in Christ. Life is impermanent yet life in and with Christ is eternal. This must receive even greater emphasis in our teaching and learning.

Finally, as Pope Francis reminds us in April this year in his prayer service at St Peter's Square, *“if we have learned anything in all this time it is that no one saves himself. Borders fall, walls collapse and all fundamentalist discourses dissolve before an almost imperceptible presence that manifests the fragility of which we are made....”* He goes onto to invite us to *“think of the project of integral human development for which we yearn, which is based on the protagonism of peoples in all their diversity...for a human family united in the search for integral human development. Here is the civilisation of love, founded on a committed community of brothers (and sisters)”*. Pope Francis gives us an invitation – the pandemic affected all to a greater or lesser degree. No one was unaffected. Hopefully we will return to our Churches with a renewed gratitude and humility. Hopefully we will return to our classrooms with a renewed gratitude – yet having learned that our education systems and our schools need resilience and flexibility. Our Catholic schools will continue to rely on teachers who recognise their grace given vocation and who can discern new paths that may lie ahead, but sure that equity, inclusion and justice is promoted and lived.

References

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