

# What's Happened to the Liturgy: Liturgical Adaptations Prompted by COVID

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## Introduction

I've been asked to review especially for priests the liturgical adaptations prompted by the covid-19 pandemic throughout most of the year 2020. I prepared this talk in early 2021 when people have started receiving vaccines, and when hope has arrived that the worst of this difficult time may soon be over. Your program lists the summary of this presentation in this way: "Many adaptations were made to accommodate the COVID pandemic. These adaptations have been the source of intense conversation. Where do we go from here? How might this impact the return to church when the COVID situation has settled?"

This talk has four parts: First, I'll explore three principles that I believe explain the liturgical adaptations of the past year. Second, I'll categorize these adaptations. (That will be the longest part of my presentation.) Third, I'll review the uses of electronic media during the pandemic. Finally, I'll propose some actions to maintain or recover.

## I. Three Principles That Prompted the Changes

Prior to March 2020, I used to say this: "The single most important thing that a Catholic can do is participate at Mass every Sunday." Now I see that I was wrong. The single most important thing that Catholics can do is to love one another. This may not seem like a big insight to you. After all, even a cursory reading of the gospels will tell you the same thing. However, this one principle best explains all the changes we made. We made them not out of liturgical theology, not out of fear, but out of love. We chose to do our part to limit the spread of the pandemic out of care for our brothers and sisters in Christ. That meant in its most radical form that the most important thing for Catholics to do was to stay home and not go to church at all for a while. That was how we loved one another.

A second principle is the importance of Sunday. In spite of everything else that changed in the pandemic, Sunday remained the Lord's Day. This is more surprising than you may think. With limits on the number of people who could enter our churches at one time, one solution could have been to give up on Sundays. We could have urged people to come to Mass on different weekdays, depending, say, on where your last name falls in the alphabet. No one seriously

proposed that; and if they had, it would have failed. We clung to our calendars. Sunday is the day of the resurrection. Sunday is the Lord's Day. We stayed with it.

A third principle we held was the importance of the priesthood. Because of the inability to put many people in church at the same time, and because of the importance of Sunday to Catholics, another solution could have been, "Honor Sundays on your own at home." Pray the Liturgy of the Hours. Use *Catholic Household Blessings and Prayers*. Extend the meal prayer. Proclaim the scriptures assigned to the Mass aloud and in real time at home in the presence of the other people who live with you. Share some insights. Some of this probably went on. But we did not hear an outcry for more and better instructions on how to pray on Sunday at home. Instead, we heard and answered a demand for more and better livestreaming of what the priest was doing on Sunday at church. That connection kept people tethered to their parishes—or to different communities of prayer with whom they established new relationships. Many Catholics preferred to watch a priest say Mass than to pray on their own at home.

These three principles—charity, Sunday and priesthood—tell us Catholics something about ourselves. We really do care for one another, and we are willing even to sacrifice the Eucharist to fulfill the great commandments to love God and to love our neighbor. We respect Sunday as the Lord's Day, and we will take no substitute—except, of course, Saturday afternoon. And in spite of all the failures of us priests, Catholics still want us to serve and even follow us online when we preside at Mass and preach.

## II. Categories of Liturgical Adaptations

The celebration of the liturgy underwent a large number of adaptations. I'll categorize these into four groups of safety measures: Establishing Distance Between People, Minimizing Contact with Objects, Shortening the Length of Services, and Keeping Necessary Proximity Safe.

### 1. Establishing Distance Between People

From the moment people arrive at church, they may have to wait at the door to gain entrance, and they are already practicing the distancing that they have learned in every public place. Pews have been roped off to keep people from sitting too closely to one another. People wear masks for extra protection, especially at the moments when they are likely to pass other churchgoers in the aisles.

Occupancy limits have affected Sunday more than weekday Masses. However, communities accustomed to celebrating daily Mass in smaller chapels may have migrated to the main church to provide greater space between worshipers. These limits have had an even greater emotional impact on weddings and funerals. Many couples have delayed their weddings in hopes of gathering their family and friends when it is safer to do so. Others have proceeded with their plans by shortening the invitation list. Funeral services similarly have either been delayed or celebrated with very few people present. Such previously unthinkable changes have become part of everyone's perspective when planning to celebrate these turning points of life.

Maintaining distance has affected the sign of peace. Many parishes suspended it altogether, whereas others permit it with restrictions. Those who arrived in the same car could hug and kiss one another before coming to communion. Those standing at some distance may exchange some other sign, such as a bow or a wave. At daily Mass, for many years prior to the pandemic, I considered it ridiculous that people sat as far away from one another as possible, which left them no option before communion except to wave or flash a two-fingered, V-shaped sign of peace. Now those choices seem prescient and prudent. They practiced distancing long before it became common. Nonetheless, the kiss of peace got its start to express intimacy, not mere recognition.

Communion processions have been rerouted to avoid the chance of proximity. Many churches have communicants process up the side aisles and return by the main aisle. This causes some loss of connection between the altar of sacrifice and the place of communion.

A physical distance of six feet keeps a person away from another person's breath. But that isn't enough distance when we sing. One of the greatest sacrifices we have made in the liturgy was our music. Singing enhances our prayer to God, but it was putting our neighbor at risk. Out of love of neighbor, we emptied our churches of music.

Out of a similar concern, many communities stopped using incense to lend solemnity to their celebrations. Clouds of incense make some people cough. Coughing, like singing, projects air a greater distance from one's mouth. Out of love for our neighbor, we emptied our churches of aromas.

Establishing distance between people was the responsible thing to do, though it caused us to sacrifice many liturgical signs: the gathering of a large assembly, the proximity of communion to the altar, a meaningful sign of peace, the music that expresses our faith, and the incense that honors our offerings. We did gain a sense of community through different signs: Wearing a mask as other people do has promoted the common good over personal comfort. Ironically, distance has held us together.

## 2. Minimizing Contact with Objects

In the early days of the pandemic, we had little understanding about its transmission. So we assumed that objects were as dangerous as the droplets from someone else's breath.

Upon arriving at church, a person may be welcomed by a greeter positioned there not so much to be pleasant and polite, but to keep all visitors from touching the same doorhandles. The courtesy has not extended to restroom doors, so these have had to be sanitized regularly.

Walking into a church, Catholics like to dip their hands in holy water to purify themselves and to recall their baptism. This simple act of piety prepares our hearts for worship. However, shared holy water fonts could spread the virus. Most churches emptied their fonts. Some set up touchless dispensers that spray holy water on your hands the way other public dispensers spray soap.

Hymnals were removed from pews. This was done not precisely to discourage singing, but to minimize the number of hands touching the same objects. The germs left behind could spread when the next person picked up the book. This has always been an issue, but our antibodies helped out as they did when we opened the door to the church on our own and dipped our hands in the community's holy water.

During the course of the Mass, the priest and deacon kiss the altar at the beginning and end of the celebration. Whichever of them reads the gospel kisses the book at the final dialogue. I am probably not the only priest who's faking it right now. I get my face close to the altar or the book, but I don't make contact. Maybe it would be more sincere to bow to these objects, which is essentially what I'm doing, hoping that people don't notice.

When the bishop presides, the deacon who reads the gospel customarily carries the book to him. The bishop then kisses it, and, in some cases, lifts the book and blesses the people with it. The *Ceremonial of Bishops* 141 makes this optional. Even when a bishop presides outside a pandemic, it's perfectly acceptable for the deacon to kiss the book. Consequently, some bishops instruct their deacons to perform this reverence as they do at any other Mass.

Collection baskets are no longer passed from hand to hand across the pews. Instead, some have placed baskets near the communion stations, inviting people to deposit their gift when they first arrive, or to place it in the basket during the preparation of the gifts. If ushers take up the collection with baskets on poles, they probably wear gloves or sanitize their hands before and after, as an extra precaution. Those who count the money have to sanitize frequently, which would have been a good idea even before the pandemic.

When Mass is over, volunteers or staff sanitize the pews before the next group of worshipers enters to use them. When Catholics enter a church, many of them select their pew and grasp the top to make their genuflection. Then they walk sideways a few steps, crouch, and pull the kneeler forward with their bare hand. In these ways they contact objects that others have touched. Out of charity, the pews and kneelers get sanitized for every Mass.

Minimizing contact with objects is the second category of liturgical changes that the pandemic prompted. These changes caused us to sacrifice some devotional exercises precious to Catholics and deepened the sense of loss over music, but they demonstrated repeatedly the extent of the care we strove to give one another when we gathered for worship.

### 3. Shortening the Length of Services

The adaptations examined so far pertain to persons and objects, but time also became a factor. It was generally held that the less time people spent indoors with one another the better.

If a cantor sings hymns, fewer verses keep the Mass shorter. Some have sung the response to the psalm only at the beginning and the end, reciting all the verses of the psalm at once. The Simple Gradual, a little-known liturgical book in

the Catholic library, envisions that option on any day. Some have replaced the final hymn with instrumental music, which is more properly what the missal envisions anyway.

The elimination of incense saved time at the entrance procession, the proclamation of the gospel, and the preparation of the gifts.

At the sprinkling rite, some priests have remained in the sanctuary. That abbreviated the ceremony and its music.

Many readers have proclaimed the shorter form of the scriptures whenever that option appeared. Some priests and deacons have preached more briefly.

When arranging the gifts on the altar, servers may prepare a separate paten for the priest's host, while setting the other hosts in larger patens or ciboria at some distance from the presider. This keeps them out of range from his breath. Some priests cover the hosts with a purificator as an extra precaution. The liturgical rubrics never envision this, but they never envisioned a pandemic of this magnitude.

Communion requires fewer vessels when administered under one kind. Consequently, it takes less time to arrange the vessels at the preparation of the gifts and to purify them after communion.

Many priests adhere even more closely to Eucharistic Prayer II, the shortest one we have.

The missal envisions that the priest breaks the bread in several pieces and shares at least some parts of his broken host with the people. But not now. He eats what he touches.

At concelebrated liturgies, many priests took their place before Mass, thus shortening the entrance procession.

All these abbreviations resulted in some loss of ceremony. It also impaired the expression of the spirituality that comes from a relaxed, attentive style of worship. If people feel rushed, it is hard for them to encounter God.

#### 4. Keeping Necessary Proximity Safe

The nature of the Catholic liturgy requires people to come in close contact with one another at certain moments. These adaptations exercised special care to address these concerns.

The entrance procession may involve fewer ministers and a shorter route. Priests accustomed to approach the altar up the center aisle may now enter from a sacristy adjacent to the sanctuary, if available. Minimizing the number of ministers in the procession widens their distance from one another while approaching their places.

Churches with small sanctuaries may have found that they could no longer put a priest, a deacon and several servers in the constricted space. They may have stationed servers in the first pew or eliminated their participation altogether.

Throughout the ceremony, ministers have had to be careful how close they draw to each other. Some priests have replaced the server who holds the book

at his chair with a lectern holding the missal in the same spot. If a server still holds the book, he or she wears a mask to increase safety.

Many dioceses have suspended the procession of the gifts. This keeps people from unnecessary close contact with one another, even briefly.

Servers are often close to each other when they bring the deacon or priest the water and wine, and when they wash the priest's hands. Therefore, they wear masks. In some sanctuaries the priest steps to the side long enough for the server to place a tray with the necessary objects on the altar. The deacon or priest then mixes the water and wine. The priest may wash his own hands. Then he may step aside again while the server removes the tray, six feet away.

A deacon needs to keep his distance from the priest. Even though he usually lifts the chalice at the end of the eucharistic prayer, many priests have performed that action themselves, rather than have the deacon stand too close.

The greatest concerns pertaining to proximity relate to the sharing of communion. Before distributing communion, the ministers sanitize their hands. This had become a custom in parishes over the past few decades already.

Communion under both kinds had been commonplace in many Catholic parishes. Not every Catholic received communion from the chalice, but they sensed something was missing if it was not available. Now, even the deacon is likely not receiving communion from the chalice. The absence of the cup is another of the greatest sacrifices we have made.

Many bishops have encouraged people to receive communion in the hand instead of in the mouth. Bishops who have mandated communion in the hand during the course of the pandemic have received approval from the Vatican. Even when distributing communion in the hand, though, ministers are careful to avoid touching skin with skin. In my diocese, I'm required to re-sanitize my hands if I accidentally touch those of a communicant, and after each communicant who receives in the mouth. We ask those receiving in the mouth to come at the end of the line to limit the number of people they put at risk.

Concelebrants face a particular challenge. They are all required to receive communion under both kinds. In the past, we could drink from the same cup, but not now. The rubrics have always permitted concelebrants to receive communion by intinction, even though they forbid deacons and lay people to dip their own host into a chalice. In recent years, some concelebrants have been choosing to receive by intinction on their own. However, the rubric suggests that they all do it the same way: Either all intinct or all drink to receive the precious blood. This models unity at communion. During the pandemic, all concelebrants may be asked to intinct. Many priests are learning rubrics they've never noticed before. For example, if the priest is going to intinct his host, he is not supposed to receive it before approaching the altar. Instead, after the presider says, "Behold the Lamb of God," each priest approaches the altar, genuflects, picks up his host from a vessel, and immediately dips it into the chalice. Then, holding the purificator beneath, he consumes the host. This keeps him from walking and genuflecting with a host in his hands.

The presider is never allowed to intinct. He must drink from the chalice, in keeping with the Lord's command. This means that at least two chalices need to be prepared for concelebration: one for the principal celebrant, from which he alone will drink, and another one (or more) for the concelebrants to use for intinction. It's best if the last priest receiving communion does not intinct, but drinks the consecrated wine that remains in the concelebrants' chalice. He then purifies that vessel.

Apart from the Mass, other Catholic ceremonies call for people to be in proximity with one another. On St. Blaise day a minister usually places the same crossed candles upon the throats of individuals while praying for the saint's intercession for preservation from disease. How ironic that this annual ceremony that prays for a person's health actually spreads germs. The *Book of Blessings* 1635 permits the priest to give the blessing over the whole congregation at once without candles to conclude the universal prayer.

For Ash Wednesday, the rubric says that the priest places ashes "on the head" of all those who come to him. This permits dropping ashes on top of one's head, a custom that is observed in some other countries even outside the pandemic. It also better suits the gospel of the day, where Jesus encourages people to wash their face so that they do not appear to be fasting.

The priest has always been permitted to use an instrument to anoint the sick, especially if touching puts him or the sick person in danger of contagion. Now the same permission is given for confirmation.

Confessionals put priest and penitent in close contact with each other. Now confessions are heard in larger spaces where the two can remain distant.

At weddings, out of an abundance of caution, our diocese requires the attendants to wear masks and to remain distant from one another throughout the ceremony. We also require the groom to place both rings in his pocket before the ceremony begins, in order to minimize the number of hands that touch them.

All of these decisions surrendered some of the symbolism that expresses our beliefs, especially at communion. These are not good principles for liturgy, but they are good principles for charity. If we come out of the pandemic loving one another more, that will be the greatest gain. But we will probably have to relearn some of the principles of the liturgy.

### **III. Electronic Media**

Humans have survived many pandemics throughout history. People had to overcome both the illness and the loss of social interaction. We are the first generation to have access to a range of electronic media for our pandemic. We fight the illness as other humans have in the past, but we have means of social interaction that they could not have imagined. Along with other professional organizations, the Catholic Church has had to learn how best to use media to continue our mission. Meetings and educational forums went digital, as people discovered the benefits and inadequacies of online gatherings.

The liturgy fell into a category of its own. We've had live-streamed services before. The Vatican has made these available for many years. But now the average parish was trying to accomplish the same thing for the first time. Leaders may have discussed the possibility of livestreaming in the past. But the pandemic finally put the ideas into action.

What makes the liturgy unique is the full, conscious, active participation of the people. People participate in the liturgy when they engage in the prayers, actions, music, dialogues and processions of worship. Participation assumes presence. The Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy never raised the question of how you could participate in a livestream partly because it was not possible, but also because it would not have made sense. When Pope Pius X coined the term "active participation" in 1903, his first example was "active participation in the most holy mysteries." He probably meant receiving the sacrament of holy communion. Participating at Mass does include a wide range of gestures and words in which people participate, but the most sublime participation is receiving communion from the bread and wine consecrated at the Mass that one is attending.

During the pandemic, many people have tuned into Mass on a computer or some other device, at home or in some other location away from the church building. When they do that, they are not participating at Mass in the full sense. They are watching Mass. Some spiritual benefit may happen, but Catholics should not confuse watching a livestream or a previously recorded Mass with participating in the real thing. They can designate a room at home, set up a screen, sing the hymns, make the responses, kneel, sit, stand at appropriate times, make an electronic donation, eliminate other distractions, and watch attentively, but they are still watching. They may be praying, but they are not participating in the Mass. Watching a livestream is a salutary thing to do during the pandemic, but it is not where we want to end up.

Bishops worldwide have released Catholics from the Sunday obligation, but Catholics should recall how canon law phrases that obligation. It does not require going to Mass or hearing a Mass or watching a Mass. The Sunday obligation is to participate at Mass.

Some parishes offer variations of this on their property. Some have invited the people who could not fit inside the church to sit in a hall. There they watch the Mass projected by closed circuit or livestream. A minister enters near the end to distribute communion. Other parishes invite people to park in the church lot and listen to the Mass on the radio, and then present themselves for communion as a minister processes from vehicle to vehicle. But we should call this what it is: It is watching a Mass or listening to a Mass and receiving communion, but it does not constitute participating in the liturgy. It has benefits during a pandemic, but this is not how Catholics are to worship. If Catholics do not grasp this distinction, it may be that, even when they are at church, they are watching the Mass, not participating in the Mass.



Electronic media have helped in other ways. Parishes make the bulletin available on the web site and email it to members at home. That produces broader distribution of the bulletin than ever before. Many gather people online for education or socializing. This has even included people under quarantine who would not otherwise be able to sign up for a bible study, for instance. People register online for a place at Mass. If one of them notifies the parish afterwards that they had just tested positive for the virus, the parish can communicate the news to all those who participated in the same liturgy.

Priests and deacons are finding out the true quality of our homilies. They're being recorded for posterity now. If we say something wrong, the bishop will have evidence.

Electronic media have filled a gap that pandemics of the past had closed. They give us ways to stay in touch with family, friends, coworkers and parishes. They bring benefits. But an application like FaceTime is still not face time. Interacting with grandchildren on a video screen is not the same as interacting with grandchildren in their home. The same is true of the Mass.

#### **IV. Actions To Maintain or Recover**

The number one action to recover is getting people to show up for Mass—but not until it is completely safe for them to do so. The principle of charity for one another still outranks coming to church. But the other two principles—the importance of Sunday and of priests—these are positioning us well to embrace a return to church. Our numbers may be depressed for some years in the future, but we will honor Sunday, we will honor Mass, and we will have people at church again.

Weddings will remain popular. For all the lamentation about the decrease in Catholic wedding ceremonies overall, couples still fall in love and still want to get married at church. They are getting engaged and rescheduling ceremonies because the wedding means something to them. The pandemic is proving how strongly couples want a Catholic wedding.

The future of funerals is harder to see. You cannot reschedule grief. By its nature, it needs attention immediately. Many engaged couples plan more than a year in advance for their wedding, but when someone dies the intensity of the grief needs attention right away. We've already seen the impact that cremation has had on funeral services—delaying them or canceling them, replacing burial in the ground with storage on a mantel or scattering at sea. I hope that people will return to church for funerals, but they are already exploring other options.

Electronic registration, communication, donations, and gatherings have proven their value. Our database of people who come to church is better now than ever before. We have contact information that we can use for activities in the future. Electronic giving impairs people's ability to ritualize their sacrifice by placing an envelope in the collection, but it helps fund parishes in a more reliable way. Some meetings we always thought we had to have in person function rather well online, or not at all. The pandemic has made us more flexible.

**Congregational singing also needs to return. We have long complained about its quality, but now we realize that, however people sing, it is literally better than nothing. Music aids our worship.**

**The sign of peace will be back, more welcome than ever. People are anxious for safe human contact again. The sign of peace will signify the charity we have been practicing this year, a charity that reaches its climax in the Eucharist.**

**Finally, I hope we'll avoid rushing the Mass. The liturgy needs time to unfold its beauty. We need time to enter prayer. The pandemic has caused us to rethink many things we took for granted. May its promised end help us refocus our attentions on a meaningful and sincere liturgy.**