

Rising to the Occasion: Participating in Mass Once Again

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Introduction

Thank you all for the warm invitation to encounter the good people of the Diocese of Las Vegas as you gather for the Diocesan Conference. Back in 2014 I had a wonderful experience with your priests going over some points such as the revised Order of Matrimony, the Lectionary for Mass, and the Eucharistic Prayer. Yesterday I had a good afternoon with your bishops, priests and deacons to review more points about celebrating Mass. I enjoyed reconnecting with them. God has blessed you with dedicated clergy in the Diocese of Las Vegas.

The theme for the conference this year is “Rise!” Bishop Thomas has written, “Our Diocesan Conference gives us a time and place to build memories, and to increase our courage and our creativity as the adult Church of Las Vegas.” Indeed you heard this summons, and you have risen to connect with one another in these important days.

I’ve been asked to speak with you about lessons learned from the pandemic and dreams to pursue. I’ve called this talk, “Rising to the Occasion: Participating in Mass Once Again.” The conference program summarizes it this way: “The pandemic has caused each of us to reconsider what matters the most. By fasting from public worship, we have sharpened our appetites to gather again. As we return, what principles will best help us be better Catholics? How do we rise to the occasion?”

Here in September of 2021, we rejoice in the hopes that the vaccines have brought, yet we fear that the proliferation of variants threatens to extend this perilous time. Especially now, we want our public worship truly to reflect not just what we cannot do because of the pandemic, or even what we can do now that many restrictions have lifted. We want our worship to represent who we are.

This talk has four parts: First, I’ll explore three principles that I believe explain the liturgical adaptations we made during the pandemic. 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 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. Use devotional prayers, such as the rosary or the chapel of divine mercy. 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 rather 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 Safe When Proximity is Required.

1. Establishing Distance Between People

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

Occupancy limits 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 had an even greater emotional impact on weddings and funerals. Many couples delayed their weddings in hopes of gathering their family and friends when it was safer to do so. Others 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 became 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 permitted 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. I don't know how your typical daily Mass looks, but at home the people who attended each day even before the pandemic were exemplars of social distancing. They scattered all throughout the church where they could avoid physical contact with one another and wave—or flash two fingers during the sign of peace. I used to make fun of this, but now I realize they were ahead of their time. Nonetheless, the kiss of peace got its start to express intimacy, not mere recognition.

Communion processions were rerouted to avoid the chance of proximity. Many churches had communicants processed up the side aisles and returned by the main aisle. This caused 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 made 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 masks in common promoted the common good over personal comfort. Ironically, distance 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 have been welcomed by a greeter positioned there not so much to be pleasant and polite, but to keep all visitors from touching the same doorhandles. Restroom doors had to be sanitized regularly.

Walking into a church, Catholics like to dip their hands into holy water to purify themselves and to recall their baptism. This simple act of piety prepares our hearts for worship. However, we feared that shared holy water fonts could spread the virus. We emptied the fonts. Some parishes set up touchless dispensers that spray holy water onto your hands the way other public dispensers spray soap. This preserved sanitation, but it further distanced the experience from the baptism it represents. Our word "baptism" comes from a Greek verb meaning "to dip." When we baptize, we immerse or we pour; we don't spray.

Hymnals were removed from pews. This was done not precisely to discourage singing, but to minimize the number of hands touching the same objects. We feared that the germs left behind could spread when the next person picked up the book. This has always been an issue, and 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. Our immune systems helped us perform many communal activities in the past, but the pandemic challenged them.

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 has been faking it lately. I get my face close to the altar or the book, but I keep my lips closed. Maybe it would be more sincere to bow to these objects, which is essentially what I'm doing, hoping 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 to bless the people. 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 instructed their deacons to perform this reverence as they do at any other Mass.

When arranging the gifts on the altar, servers may have prepared 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 kept them out of range from his breath. Some priests covered the hosts with a purificator as an extra precaution. The liturgical rubrics never envision this, but they never envisioned a pandemic of this magnitude either. They do mention a pall over the chalice, so perhaps a purificator over the hosts performed a similar function by extension.

Collection baskets were 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 took up the collection with baskets on poles, they probably wore gloves or sanitized 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.

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 during a pandemic. He ate what he touched.

When Mass was over, volunteers or staff sanitized the pews before the next group of worshipers entered 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 others have touched. Out of charity, the pews and kneelers were 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.

Leaders of song may have reduced the number of verses to keep the Mass shorter. Some sang the response to the psalm only at the beginning and the end. Some replaced the final hymn with instrumental music, which is 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 remained in the sanctuary. That abbreviated the ceremony and its music.

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

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

Many priests used even more frequently Eucharistic Prayer II, the shortest one we have.

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

All these abbreviations resulted in some loss of ceremony. They 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 Safe When Proximity is Required

The nature of the Catholic liturgy requires people to come in close contact with one another at certain moments. These adaptations addressed those concerns.

The entrance procession may have involved fewer ministers and a shorter route. Some priests accustomed to approach the altar up the center aisle entered from a sacristy adjacent to the sanctuary, if available. Minimizing the number of ministers in the procession widened their distance from one another while approaching their places.

Churches with small sanctuaries may have found 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 drew to each other. Some priests have replaced the server who holds the missal at his chair with a lectern holding the missal in the same spot. If a server still held the book, he or she wore a mask to increase safety.

Many dioceses suspended the procession of the gifts. This kept people from unnecessary close contact with one another, even briefly, though at the price of the ritual that symbolized their sacrificial offering.

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 have worn masks. In some sanctuaries the priest stepped to the side long enough for the server to place a tray with the necessary objects on the altar. The deacon or priest then mixed the water and wine. The priest may have washed his own hands. Then he may have stepped aside again while the server removed the tray, six feet away.

A deacon had 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, ministers have sanitized their hands. This had become a custom in parishes over the past few decades already. In some parishes it borders on becoming its own ritual like the procession of the gifts or the breaking of bread: The Sanitizing of the Hands. Who knows? Maybe soon we'll be singing a hymn to accompany the action.

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 may not be receiving communion from the chalice. The absence of the cup is another of the greatest sacrifices we have made.

Many bishops encouraged people to receive communion in the hand instead of the mouth. Bishops who have mandated communion in the hand for the period of the pandemic received approval from the Vatican. Even when distributing communion in the hand, though, ministers were careful to avoid touching skin with skin. Some ministers re-sanitized their hands if they accidentally touched those of a communicant; others after each communicant who received in the mouth. Some parishes asked those receiving in the mouth to come at the end of the line to limit the number of people they put at risk.

Concelebrants faced a particular challenge. They are all required to receive communion under both kinds. In the past, we drank from the same cups, but not during a pandemic. 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 receiving 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 around and genuflecting with a host in his hands.

The presider is not allowed to intinct. He drinks 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. Perhaps the last priest receiving communion does not intinct, but drinks the consecrated wine that remains in the concelebrants' chalice. He could then purify that vessel.

Apart from the Mass, other Catholic ceremonies call for people to be in proximity with one another. On St. Blase 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 may actually spread 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, and many blessed throats that way this year.

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 and that happened in many of our parishes this year. 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 such as a cotton swab 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. Many confessions have been heard in larger spaces where the two can remain distant.

At weddings, out of an abundance of caution, attendants may wear masks and remain distant from one another throughout the ceremony. In my diocese we originally required the groom to place both rings in his pocket before the ceremony began, 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 were not good principles for liturgy, but they were 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 a pandemic, and it has other benefits for evangelization, catechesis, and the fostering of community. But it only works because somebody is at church participating at Mass, and that's where we belong.

Bishops worldwide released Catholics from the Sunday obligation during the worst of the pandemic, 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 offered hybrid 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 watched the Mass projected by closed circuit or livestream. A minister entered near the end to distribute communion. Other parishes invited people to park in the church lot, listen to the Mass on the radio, and then present themselves for communion as a minister processed 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 eucharist. 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 wrongfully watching the Mass, not participating in the Mass.

Electronic media have helped communication 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 registered online for a place at Mass. If one of them notified the parish afterwards that they had just tested positive for the virus, the parish could communicate the news to all 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 opened. They kept us in touch with family, friends, coworkers and parishes. They have brought benefits. But applications are not gatherings. 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 when it is safe for them to do so. The principle of charity for one another will always outrank 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 lower for a while, 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 assures a habit of giving 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.

As music returns, people of faith contribute to its glorious sound. Many worshipers have long complained about the quality of music at their church, but now we realize that, however people sing, it is literally better than nothing. Music aids our worship.

The sign of peace will be more welcome than ever. People are anxious for safe human contact again. The sign of peace will signify the charity we have been practicing, 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 eventual end help us refocus our attentions on a meaningful and sincere liturgy.

May it help us rise to the occasion and participate in Mass once again.¹

¹ This talk is based on “What’s Happened to the Liturgy: Liturgical Adaptations Prompted by COVID,” Virtual Southwest Liturgical Conference, 2 February 2021.