

# SIGNS OF PANDEMIC, SYMBOLS OF HOPE: A SKETCH OF PASTORAL WORK IN LITURGY

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## ABSTRACT

Bearing in mind that the faithful have already experienced the different impacts of COVID-19 in their daily life, pastoral workers need to find new ways of respecting the liturgical norms while also inviting and sustaining the spiritual motivation of the faithful to personally participate in liturgy. One possibility is through juxtaposing the signs of the pandemic encountered in our daily life with the symbols of liturgical celebration. To this end, pastoral workers need to facilitate an appropriate symbolic engagement process during liturgy.

## Burning Questions

When you are doing pastoral work and members of your congregation ask you about the meaning of this pandemic, what will you say? Will you give them the standard interpretation or will you help them find their own meaning behind this pandemic? It is very easy to simply repeat the mantra “have faith,” “don’t lose hope,” or “God will win” to those who ask the question. But this kind of approach in pastoral work is like putting water on the fire. It will make the faithful stop asking more questions which could deepen their reflections. Growth in their faith will eventually be hindered because their reflections cannot lead them to experience a leap of faith.

It is also very easy to engage in pastoral work while following only the minimum requirements set by the guidelines of the Church. There are guidelines from the Holy See which we can follow regarding confession, spiritual communion, and sacramental participation in this time of the pandemic.<sup>1</sup> However, a better pastoral approach involves more than that. It should provide the spiritual energy needed by the victims (in the widest sense) of this pandemic to create a continuous reflection in faith based on their own daily struggles living through this pandemic.

Imagine if the one asking you the question is someone who has just lost a relative due to the virus, or someone who has been laid off from a company or had to declare bankruptcy as a result of the impact of the COVID-19 virus. For these kinds of tragic experiences, we cannot just give them an empty promise of a better future. We need to help people maintain their spiritual ability to find hope even though the tragedy is upon them. We also need to be very careful not to give the impression that we are the ones who control the meaning of this unavoidable situation. It is God’s Holy Spirit who will enlighten and bring hope to those experiencing the tragedy. Pastoral workers are needed to facilitate this experience.

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1. Depending on geographical scope and pandemic conditions, each diocese has their own policy regarding online liturgical celebrations. However, a comprehensive guideline from the Holy See regarding our sacramental life during a pandemic can be found in Dicastery for Communication of the Holy See (ed.), “What If I Can’t Participate in the Sacraments? How to Receive the Grace of the Lord When Unable to Participate Physically in Liturgical Celebrations,” in *Strong in the Face of Tribulation the Church in Communion: A Sure Support in Time of Trial* (Roma: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020), 53–68.

Thus, our pastoral work should involve a two-fold approach. We need to help the victims who are, on one hand, “befriending” their own tragic experience of living under stress in these uncertain times and, on the other, “putting it under the blessing” of God.<sup>2</sup> First, we need to remove fear from their hearts so that they can receive the presence of the Holy Spirit even during these trying times. And after that, we need to make room also for the *mystery* of God’s providence to take place within those persons hearts. In other words, we do not feed the victims with our own interpretation of their tragic situation. Rather, we guide their hearts to be receptive to the presence of God’s providence so that a personal encounter between the two can take place. Our pastoral work, then, will become more about preparation to facilitate the reception of the congregation to God’s grace and to allow God’s grace itself to heal the congregation.

## Pastoral Work and Life Symbols

How can we do this kind of pastoral work? Giving an inspiring homily during the liturgy is one possible way to do it. However, considering the time limitation on liturgical rites performed during the pandemic, we can only do so much through liturgical homilies. In addition, the victims who undergo different kinds of tragedy during the pandemic tend to avoid being taught by other people. They are not in a situation where they can be persuaded to follow certain ideals or guidelines. Needless to say, we do not want to give them the impression of being criticized, judged, or mocked about their tragic experiences when we deliver a homily. Considering the fragile emotional state they are in, misunderstandings can happen easily. Thus, if we want to utilize the homily as our main pastoral means, we really need to compose a short but inspiring (rather than a preachy) homily. Instead of the homily, I am more inclined to rely on a more spiritual approach in our pastoral work. I am not talking about spiritual conversation with the victims, although I am not denying that it is also helpful as a pastoral means during this pandemic. I am suggesting an approach which juxtaposes the pandemic signs with the liturgical symbols.

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2. I borrowed these phrasings from Henri Nouwen’s *Life of the Beloved*. There, he mentioned, “the AIDS crisis demands a wholly new look at our human brokenness. How can we respond to this brokenness? I’d like to suggest two ways: first, befriending it and second, putting it under the blessing.” Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in A Secular World* (New York: Crossroad Book, 1992), 92.

Ritual is a very therapeutic way to deal with the experience of tragedies. Liturgical rites, even in abbreviated forms, can facilitate a reconciliation with our inability to cope with tragic experiences. A lot of signs of the pandemic can bring back the painful memory of being defeated in this life. Victims of pandemic tragedies need to make peace with the reality of being vulnerable to uncertain conditions signified by the pandemic. This is the first pastoral step to help those victims go beyond their tragic experiences: we need to guide them out from being incapacitated by these signs of vulnerability. Through sacramental liturgies, the power of symbolic communication may provide a channel for the victims of the pandemic tragedy to express their signs of vulnerabilities and find in those signs the existence of God who wants to save them.

Symbolic expressions of sacramental rites are said to be the prerequisites for the efficacy of the sacraments.<sup>3</sup> But this points to more than just the juristic matter of sacramental efficacy. This is pointing to the fact that through symbols we can communicate our deepest thoughts and feelings, the inexpressible richness of our faith's existential struggles. Symbolic communication in sacramental rites helps us to be aware of the richness of our faith in identifying the mystery of God's grace behind those life struggles.<sup>4</sup> Thus, sacramental rites need to provide space both for the communication of the symbols of God's grace and our own personal signs of vulnerability. In other words, sacramental liturgies become the events for the symbols of God's grace to give new life and meanings to the signs of our own vulnerabilities.

Our sacramental rites in this time of a pandemic can be events through which we find new ways to live with the signs of our vulnerabilities. Placed in front of the constellation of liturgical symbols, what do our masks, our social distance markers, our disinfectants, and digital devices which support our social and liturgical lives mean? Only by placing them under the light of our liturgical symbols, can we allow the symbols of our faith to give birth to a transforming experience of our vulnerabilities in this pandemic era.

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3. Canon Law 834 §1 states that "In the sacred liturgy the sanctification of humanity is signified through sensible signs and effected in a manner proper to each sign." Thus, for example, in Canon 849, the efficacy of the sacrament of baptism is said to be dependent upon its "washing of true water with the proper form of words."

4. Regarding our use of symbols in liturgy, Louis-Marie Chauvet states that "our approach through symbol – like those using the comparisons of instruments or cause – can be but one way of getting nearer to the mystery." Louis-Marie Chauvet, *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body* (Pueblo Books, 2001), 89.

## Masks

Masks are a very common health accessory. For example, we also have the habit of wearing them to avoid air pollution in non-pandemic situation. But during a pandemic, masks can also be a symbol for protecting lives, even the “lives” in memory of the victims. The famous tennis player, Naomi Osaka, used masks to give breath to the lost lives of African Americans. She wore masks with the names of African Americans who were victims of racial prejudice. By wearing these masks during her matches, it was as if she wanted to convey the message of dedicating her efforts in sport to those victims so that their memories can be kept alive.<sup>5</sup>

Our attendance at Mass during this pandemic is also characterized by the presence of congregation members wearing masks. But masks during liturgical celebrations will only be a symbol of health preservation if we do not put them in the context of the rest of the liturgical symbols. They will remain alien to the liturgical celebration and will only be a reminder of incapacitating vulnerability. We do not need to imitate what Osaka did during our liturgy. But her example can give us an insight about the direction of reinterpreting masks as symbols of giving breath to a memory, of keeping certain memories alive by eliciting a conversation about them.<sup>6</sup> Rather than becoming a sign of being vulnerable, we can utilize our mask as a symbol for a conversation starter.

How can we integrate this process of symbolic engagement into the liturgy without disrupting its natural flow? As mentioned, there is always the teaching moment of the homily which can be readily applied to trigger the conscientization process of the whole congregation. However, to avoid the involuntary response from the already suffering congregation, the juxtaposition between liturgical symbols and the masks can be inserted as an awareness process within the dialogical moments of the liturgy. For example, before the dialogue of

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5. Asked by a reporter about what is the message behind her mask, Osaka replied, “Well, ‘What was the message that you got? ... I feel like the point is *to make people start talking*.” Italics added. For the news itself refer to <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2020/09/12/naomi-osaka-us-open-message/> (accessed 13 September 2020).

6. Regarding the relationship between sacraments and ethics, Louis-Marie Chauvet emphasized the role of memory. He mentions that “the memorial is an act of collective memory which causes the present to budge and open onto the future. The memory of the suffering endured, the oppression undergone, and the struggle undertaken to bring about liberation initiates movement.” Chauvet, *The Sacraments*, 55.

the penitential rite, we can introduce it by making a statement juxtaposing the masks with the prayer for mercy.<sup>7</sup> The presider can introduce the penitential rite with this invocation: “Together with the bodily protection which we are wearing now, let us beg also for the protection of God’s mercy to make us a better instrument of his living Word.”

This juxtaposition will instill a new awareness about the spiritual nature of the mask we are wearing. It will instill the fact that even though we are silenced by the “mask” created by the pandemic, God’s mercy is the shield we need to keep on pronouncing the Good News. Similarly, we can do this kind of juxtaposition also in other dialogical parts of the Mass during which the congregation members can be introduced to the connection between the living Word and the spiritual nature of their mask. For example, during the responsorial psalm, the soloist can accentuate this connection by inviting the congregation to repeat the response of the psalm saying, “Let us together *boldly proclaim* our response to the Word of God by together saying, (*followed by the psalm response for the day*).”

By creating a juxtaposition between the protection our masks offer so that we can speak freely in this pandemic and the protective shield of God’s mercy so that we can proclaim the Good News, we can apply a particular place for our masks as a spiritual symbol interacting with other liturgical symbols. This interaction will further open the door for the work of the Holy Spirit to integrate the saving grace of God with our daily activities which are characterized by the use of masks.

## Social Distance Markers

We can see tape marking our seats on the pew in order to maintain social distance during the liturgy. The inability to shake each other’s hands, hug, or kiss is one of the results of these markers. We may question how far the liturgy can affect our lives without the actual acknowledgment of one another among the congregation during the liturgy itself. Indeed, one of the reasons why social distance can create an incapacitating fear is that it gives the false impression of

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7. General Instructions for Roman Missal (GIRM) §46 state that the role of the penitential rite is to prepare the congregation to enter into the Liturgy of the Word. The introductory dialogue can be utilized to make the congregation aware of the connection between the need to keep God’s words alive and the need to protect ourselves from the pandemic.

“exile.”<sup>8</sup> However, ultimately, we cannot but admit that those markers are there to protect us from infecting one another, rather than to inhibit our personal and active participation in the liturgy. Thus, how can we utilize the positive aspect of these markers with the rest of the liturgical symbols so as not to make them a foreign object or even a justification to participate in the liturgy passively?

Social distance markers, indeed, can send the wrong signal to the liturgical participants: that they are allowed to be separated from other participants. Our liturgical celebrations are not about separation. They are about letting ourselves be united as one into the mystical body of Christ. The markers can be repurposed to serve this end. Instead of being a sign to create empty spaces (or distances) between the participants, they can be symbols of our own shared sacred space, our own symbolic expression to invite the presence of the Holy Spirit connecting us within our communal space.<sup>9</sup> When we celebrate liturgy, we unite the sacred space of our hearts with the sacred space of God. However, this sacred space is not symbolized through the marking of our own territory in the house of worship (which already happened even before the time of the pandemic). We can be aware of the unity of sacred spaces during liturgical celebration once we realize that we are *opening up* to the bigger and wider celebration of the angelic liturgy in heaven.<sup>10</sup>

This kind of awareness often did not happen easily in our pre-pandemic liturgical celebration. Back then, we tended to worry about the place which we can occupy in the pews. We tend to demarcate our own position in the pews by putting our belongings there. We tend to forget that our liturgy is our participation in the bigger liturgy, the celestial one. We tend to forget that we need to open ourselves to this bigger liturgy. But with the extra space presently available in the church, we can start to reduce our worries about marking a particular territory available for us. We can redirect our whole endeavor now to be attentive to the opening of the space in our hearts and to the celebration of

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8. Steven R. Martins reminds us that “social distancing does not mean total isolation or exile, as if no fellowship or conversation can be had.” Steven R. Martins, *Pandemic: Reflections on COVID-19, God’s Sovereignty, Church, and Mission* (Canada: Cántaro Institute, 2020), 24.
  9. Pope Francis encourages us to perceive the social distance we have to endure as “an opportunity to reflect, to withdraw from the frenetic pace of life.” Pope Francis, *Life After the Pandemic* (Roma: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020), 29.
  10. Regarding the use of images during liturgy, GIRM 318 reminds us that they should be a reminder that “in the earthly Liturgy, the Church participates, by a foretaste, in that heavenly Liturgy.”

the angelic liturgy in heaven. With the presence of the social distance markers, we can use them to remind the congregation about the opening up of their hearts to the liturgy above. In this way, social distance markers can serve also as spiritual symbols of heart opening rather than mere signs of us trying to create distance needed for protecting each other's health.

This juxtaposition process can be applied in many ways. One that comes to mind is by announcing it as an invitation in the opening prayer. The General Instructions for Roman Missal (GIRM) encourages placing silence between the invitation to the Collect and the reciting of the prayer itself.<sup>11</sup> This silence is meant to be a time to recollect the sense of communal presence which links the liturgy both here on earth and in heaven. During the invitation, we can add a short invitation to recognize the distance among the members in a more spiritual manner. We can reintroduce them as a reminder for the space in our hearts which we need to open to the heavenly liturgical celebration. We can use, for example, this sentence, "Regardless of the physical distance among us, let us together open our hearts and unite them with the prayers of the heavenly angels."

In addition, rather than using sticker signs which only gives the right to sit in a particular place, we can use the sticker signs with the picture of angelic liturgical celebration. And perhaps it is best to add these stickers with sentences such as, "Keep your distance from each other and share the space in your heart with God." In this way, the seat markers will serve more as spiritual symbols of opening hearts rather than as alienating signs which focus more on maintaining physical distance.

## Disinfectants

In a medical setting, disinfectants are not an alien object. Based on its function in this setting, disinfectants can be a symbol which point to the condition of being washed and pure. Considering the pandemic situation, none of us would question the necessity of using them on the palms of our hands before the liturgy starts. Also, none of us would object to its presence in the vicinity of the altar. But when we put disinfectants as a requirement to enter the church or put them close to the altar so that the priest can disinfect himself

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11. GIRM 54 states that before the Collect, "the priest invites the people to pray. All, together with the priest, observe a brief silence *so that they may be conscious of the fact that they are in God's presence and may formulate their petitions mentally.*" Italics added.

before distributing communion, we are more or less being reminded of the invisible threat from the pandemic situation: that it is still out there, lurking and waiting to catch us when we are off-guard. This sudden jolt of threat during the liturgy is the last thing we want to experience when we are celebrating the liturgy. And yet it is still a possibility to distract us from our intention to focus all of our attention on the liturgy.

A reminder of the issue of the pandemic is the one thing that we want to get away from when we participate in the liturgy in the time of a pandemic. We do not want to be reminded all the time about the feeling of insecurity. ("Am I clean enough?") But it is precisely the exposure to this reminder that will bring a therapeutic moment to the participants.

Needless to say, liturgy is never an escapist event. We are not going to Mass or any other liturgical celebration to avoid facing the real problems of our daily lives. Furthermore, we do not attend liturgy with the intention to manipulate God. Our participation in liturgical celebrations can never be intended as a kind of "show" to God, who in turn will provide us with the solutions for our life problems just in the way we hope. However, we *do* attend Mass to surrender all of our existential journey to God. We *do* purposely expose the whole reality of our life to the mercy of God. We *do* hope that by participating in liturgical celebration, we can harmonize the light and shadows of our lives with God's own way of seeing things. In short, the therapeutic moment of liturgy takes place when we can admit that we are totally dependent on God. Thus, while disinfectants signify our own dire need for physical cleanliness, the liturgy exposes us to the fact that we are in dire need of God's mercy as the true source of our spiritual purity.

That is why a jolt of reminder about purity triggered by the symbolic meaning of the disinfectants during liturgy may not be such a hindrance to the liturgy itself after all. The sudden emergence of that feeling of insecurity can initiate our own silence before God. True and honest conversation with God takes place when we enter into this deep silence. And in turn honest and deep conversation with God will lead to the conviction of God's own saving work in the course of our personal history.

We can facilitate this initiative for a deep conversation with God, for example, by putting the text of a short prayer on the bottle of the disinfectants. It can be a prayer about purity of the soul achieved through having a strong faith in the miraculous work of God throughout history. Thus, rather than worrying

about the need for medical purity or even advertising the disinfectant itself, we can juxtapose the cleanliness issue and purity of soul. We can initiate this process even before the liturgy starts by dispensing the bottle of the disinfectants to the congregation before entering the church while praying the prayer written on it. Another way to do this is through the priest who disinfects himself before distributing communion and praying the prayer of purification while doing the disinfecting. By doing this, he will reveal to the congregation the transition of spiritual awareness from using a disinfectant to the conviction about receiving communion as God's own miraculous saving work for us. For the prayer of the presider, we can use the prayer from Psalm 77:11, "I will remember the works of the Lord. Yes, I will remember the amazing things you did long ago."<sup>12</sup>

## Symbols of Digital Devices

Besides the other online social activities, most of our liturgical celebrations now are also done through online gatherings. Online liturgy is also not something new. The issue of active participation during online worship has been there even before the COVID-19 pandemic started. We need to recognize that it is the best that we can do under the circumstances besides limiting the number of participants and the length of the actual celebration in the church. We should be grateful for the support from technological devices that provide us with a way to cope with the issue of social gatherings limitation on numbers. When public gatherings are not encouraged or even prohibited, we can consider it truly as God's grace just to be able to celebrate our faith as an online community. We can even make this an opportunity to really experience the true strength of our faith: that its reach goes beyond the scope of our church's architectural space.

We may find that our online liturgy is far from the ideal liturgical celebration. We do need to make some compromises in terms of maintaining our active participation. Online liturgy may prevent the whole range of full, active, and conscious engagement with the liturgical symbols. However, this can also be an opportunity for really strengthening our spiritual motivation for

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12. Regarding the interpretation of Psalm 77:11, Walter Brueggemann mentions that the change from verse 10 to 11 reflects the spiritual movements of a person who wants to keep his own life to someone with "a readiness to lose life in order to gain it." He mentioned further that "by v.11, the speaker has abandoned the preoccupation with self and is able to focus on this one who 'has changed'." Walter Brueggemann, *Virus as a Summons to Faith: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Anxiety* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020), 53.

participating in the Mass in the first place. In this respect, the way we perceive our digital devices in the context of online liturgical celebration can be our guiding light in purifying our motivation.

First, we should realize the limitation of digital devices we are using in sustaining our active participation. For example, we cannot sing with the whole congregation the way we used to. It is also possible that there may be poor internet connection which prevents us from concentrating during the Mass. Sometimes this also affects the length of the Mass itself. For Mass through Zoom, sometimes we are forced to cut the Mass short just so that people who cannot afford bigger data plans can attend the whole Mass. But I believe the main compromise of the online Mass is that the online participants can receive only spiritual communion. Especially during times of crisis, our unity with God symbolized through the consuming of the Body of Christ is considered to be the main source of strength and remedy for the soul. Imagine the feeling of incompleteness felt by the parishioners when they receive only spiritual communion to satisfy their thirst and hunger as the source of spiritual life. These are the realities which we have to face in regard to utilizing digital devices for Mass online.

Needless to say, we should not make these realities an excuse to avoid online Mass. From my personal experience, what seems to be the limitation of Mass online can be redeemed by the fact that it can refocus our attention to the essence of celebrating our faith in the liturgy. Focusing only on the limitations of the digital devices support for our liturgical celebrations, we are left with nothing but a feeling of dissatisfaction. But the limitations of the digital devices can be reintroduced during the celebration as symbols of ourselves trying to appreciate the value of these instances of “uselessness” as our stepping stone to meet God in the turmoil of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>13</sup> To better understand this point, first let us take a look at our relationship with our digital devices.

Our daily activities are already filled with the presence of digital devices. The COVID-19 pandemic forces us to familiarize ourselves not only with the intricate usage of these devices but also the realities they silently tell us about our true selves. With the high frequency of usage during our work from home, the intimacy we are building with our devices reflects back to us the level of spiritual intimacy we

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13. Regarding the symbolic meaning of technology in the liturgy, Nathan D. Mitchell mentions that “[r]itual symbols thus constitute a ‘retechnologization’ of human artifacts, a transformation of the merely ‘useful’ into the sublimely ‘useless.’” Nathan D. Mitchell, *Meeting Mystery: Liturgy, Worship, Sacraments* (New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 267.

have with our true selves. Staying isolated during the pandemic can force us to face the reality or even the worst things that we do not want to see about ourselves. Like a bolt from the blue, we often find parts of our true reality reflected back to us in the way we use our devices. Added to the weariness from the long hours of social interactions through digital devices used for remote working, all of these tensions from our digital life can build up a certain level of emotional fatigue.

Even though working from home is not something new, the recent pandemic really turned it into a traumatic experience. Especially in developing countries, where internet technology is still limited in the rural areas, working from home can create an even more vicious cycle than job efficiency. Our work schedule is suddenly disrupted and we let ourselves get accustomed to an irregular pattern of life and work balance. In addition, when most poor families rely on cellphones to connect to the internet, this pandemic forces them to share the same cellphone (and its limited data plan) for their children's online education. Working from home becomes more and more stressful and eventually forces people to look for ways to release the stress.

Digital devices, then, may become a source of stressful memories. After long hours of online activities, people become exhausted and want to get as far away as possible from them. However, it seems to be impossible these days considering these devices are our main bridges to social life during this pandemic. But this is our relationship to digital devices that we have to take into account when we enter the online liturgical celebrations. The basic attitude of attending and participating in the liturgy is humility about who we are in front of God. Our extensive usage of digital devices during this pandemic era may prepare us to reach that spiritual state of humility before we participate in the online liturgy. The brokenness of our reality, the stressful moments of working from home while helping our children studying, the feeling of uneasiness from knowing that we have to live with the uncertainties of the pandemic – all of these are our lamentations which can serve as our stepping stones to surrender to God.<sup>14</sup>

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14. The basic disposition of our Christian faith is that all of our miseries are not a curse from God rather they are our channels to surrender to God. Tom Wright reminds us also about this when he mentions that “when we are caught up in awful circumstances, apparent gross injustices, terrible plagues – or when we are accused of wicked things of which we are innocent, suffering strange sickness with no apparent reason, let alone cure – at those points we are to lament, we are to complain, we are to state the case, and leave it with God.” Tom Wright, *God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and Its Aftermath* (London: SCPK, 2020), 14.

The digital devices used during online liturgy may prevent us from recognizing these spiritual realities. If anything, they may even become a trigger for us to run away from online activities, including online Mass. That is why online liturgy should really put these devices in the background so as not to appear mainly as symbols of frustration. Their usage for online liturgy should be placed in the background just enough for the participants to be aware of their own spiritual experience from daily interaction with those devices. In this same manner, online Mass can be an event for celebrating our transformative experience in becoming humble servants of the Lord. It can help us to recognize that it is through our brokenness, fatigue, and frustration as servants that we are drawn to surrender ourselves to God.

How can we facilitate this transformation of awareness during the online Mass? Again, the aim is to reveal the two sides of our situation in this pandemic: on one side it is an unavoidable situation we have to face, but on the other side it can also be a gateway to deepen the spiritual knowledge about ourselves and God. One possibility to do this during online Mass is by utilizing the prayer of the faithful. We can use this moment to invite the online participants to actually give voice to their prayers from their own microphones. The point being stressed here is to re-experience the digital devices from a spiritual perspective: that digital devices are not only signs of the stress or frustration during the pandemic, they can also symbolize the voice of our hope during this pandemic. Experiencing first hand this change of symbolic meaning can bring about a transformation of awareness about digital devices. Hopefully, this transformation will continue to lead the congregation to deepen their own spiritual insights about their own self-image and God's calling through their use of the digital device. In this way, the prayer of the faithful can be utilized to facilitate the congregation experiencing their own turning point in becoming closer to God.

Needless to say, we have to plan carefully if we want to apply this juxtaposition during the prayer of the faithful in an online Mass. It is impossible to let all online participants to express their very own private prayer during this moment. We can decide beforehand regarding those who want to say the prayers on behalf of the community. We can ask them to formulate a prayer on behalf of the community while giving them also the directions from

GIRM 70 on how to compose a prayer of the faithful.<sup>15</sup> We also need to be aware of the platform of the SNS we are using for online Mass. For example, online Mass through Zoom can easily facilitate this purpose. Online Mass through YouTube will need a different kind of approach to enable a more direct participation in the prayer of the faithful.

But before we plan all those technical things, let us not forget that it is the task of the presider to introduce the context of this whole endeavor.<sup>16</sup> The presider needs to make the congregation realize the importance of the prayer of the faithful in the context of online Mass. For example, the presider can mention it during the introductory prayer of the faithful with a simple prayer: “Through the same devices we use to relate to each other during this time of pandemic, let us offer to God all of our petitions and prayers.” And to conclude the prayer of the faithful, the presider can use a prayer such as, “Dear Father in heaven, we have found our own true selves when we are relating to each other even only digitally during this time of pandemic. Please make these prayers we raise up to you through our devices, an everlasting means to deepen our own relationship with you, our one and true God, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.” It is the introductory and the concluding prayer of the presider which will guide the transformation of awareness of the congregation on the right path of finding God when they are using their digital devices.

## Integration and Conclusion

Can you “stop” faith during a pandemic? Definitely, no. We have witnessed the multi-faceted impact of COVID-19 on our daily lives. With the dawn of the new normal, we come to realize that the pandemic triggered not only the need for existential survival but also the need to make sense of all the

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15. Regarding the implementation of GIRM 70, Paul Turner reminds mentioned that “the Prayer of the Faithful is integral to every celebration of the Mass. It is the most freely composed part of the entire liturgy, except for the Homily. There are guidelines for its content, but its design expects the local community to formulate the petitions for which it will pray.” Paul Turner, *At the Supper of the Lamb: A Pastoral and Theological Commentary on the Mass* (Chicago: Liturgical Training Press, 2010), 45.

16. GIRM 71 gives a very clear instruction on the role of the main celebrant as the one who “direct this prayer from the chair. He himself begins it with a brief introduction, by which he invites the faithful to pray, and likewise he concludes it with a prayer. The intentions announced should be sober, be composed freely but prudently, and be succinct, and they should express the prayer of the entire community.”

uncertainties which come with it. Can we adapt to those uncertainties? Can we even go beyond those uncertainties and see the new potential from God behind them? Can we let our whole selves be spiritually transformed through these uncertainties? We often find that the way to answer these challenges can only be done through our own perseverance in waiting until this storm has passed. However, we need to realize also that it is a different kind of waiting, one which is characterized by the celebration of our faith, which we need to strengthen in this era of the new normal.

There are a lot of examples of the new normal being introduced also into our liturgical celebration after the pandemic started. The natural engagement process with liturgical symbols is somewhat disrupted because the liturgy itself must take place within a new environment while implementing new measures to prevent the spread of the disease. Such a new environment takes the form of the small number of participants of the worshipping community or the SNS multiplatforms for the online liturgy. The new measures are the use of masks, social distance markers, disinfectants, etc. The challenge for us now is to integrate the spiritual meanings of these new elements of worship in a new environment rather than seeing them as limitations or even obstacles in celebrating our faith through online liturgy.

Integrating these new added elements to the constellation of liturgical symbols can make the online liturgy a source of spiritual strength we need in order to wait in hope during this pandemic. As explained above, our online liturgy can transform our masks to be more than just a symbol of isolation or silencing. Liturgy can express them as a symbol of protection or invitation to initiate our inner conversation with God. Social distance markers need to be more than just a sign of safe separation from others. Rather, online liturgy should help us to recognize them as symbols of spiritual openness to the whole liturgical community both on earth and in heaven. Similarly, disinfectants can be transformed into a symbol of spiritual purity as the result of our deeper unity with God.

Online liturgy during the pandemic crisis is not about mending the disconnection we have with the pre-pandemic situation. Rather, it is about the continuation, the embodiment of all the preparation we have been building since the pre-pandemic era to become even better Christians. As such, online liturgy, should facilitate the transformation of our relationship with the tools we use in this world to do that. Digital devices, which can be symbols of all the negativity

we experience in this moment, can be reimagined by juxtaposing them with our own symbolic communications through the liturgical prayers. In this way, we can help our congregation to face their own tragic reality as the victims (in its broadest sense) of this pandemic, while also recognizing that the same realities may help them to be aware of their own true selves in front of God.

Finally, we need to remember that all pastoral work through online liturgy described so far does not entail that we should orchestrate the Mass to suit our own needs. Pastoral work through liturgy is not about experimenting or playing with the symbols. It is about facilitating a liturgical event to open our hearts to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit in our daily reality. We can initiate this by integrating the symbols of our life's experience with the whole constellation of liturgical symbols which already existed. Thus, the focus of our pastoral work is not about rearranging the mechanics of the liturgy itself. It is about integrating the daily experience of the participants living in this pandemic era so that they can find the saving hand of God through those experiences. Only then will our pastoral work support their efforts in sustaining faith, hope and charity during the pandemic. Signs of pandemic will then become symbols of hope.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ANTONIUS FIRMANSYAH, S.J., is an Indonesian Jesuit. He has been working in Japan since 2002. He received his Licentiate in Theology (STL) from Sophia University (Tokyo, Japan) and Doctorate in Theology (STD) from Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University (Berkeley, USA). Currently, he is teaching at the Theology Department of Sophia University in Tokyo. Besides the subject of Liturgical Theology, which he teaches for the regular course, he also teaches Pastoral Liturgy as a summer course for the catechists and high school teachers of religion and ethics from all over Japan. He is also involved in doing pastoral ministry for the multicultural parishes surrounding Tokyo and beyond.