

Bishop Michael Router: Sermon - Holy Thursday 2021

For the second year running we find ourselves in the strange situation of celebrating Holy Week behind closed doors. For many faithful Catholics it is a cause of great pain and sorrow. There has been a growing sense of frustration among a small group who believe that the COVID-19 pandemic is being used to persecute the Church and to push religion to the margins of society. They have been vocal in expressing their opposition and their anger at civic and church leaders. I have received quite a few letters in recent weeks expressing that anger and encouraging me, and all bishops, to go against public health advice and open the churches under level 5, the present level of restrictions in force.

It is of course understandable that those who love the Eucharist feel a deep sense of frustration at present. It is, however, one of the most devious features of this virus that it thrives in gatherings of human beings. This leaves many of those who would regularly attend religious services vulnerable and very much at risk. It is a risk that at level 5 we simply cannot take. We cannot put people's lives in danger when there is such a high level of transmission of the virus in the community. The problem, of course, arises when we move down to a different level of restrictions, to either levels four or three. According to the government guidelines we are still not allowed to gather for worship. It is this that we vigorously oppose. Churches are safer in a less virulent stage of the pandemic than the range of venues that will be allowed to open. It is our ardent wish that when the public health authorities release us from level 5 we will be able to return, cautiously and with many precautions in place, to the community celebration of the Eucharist.

On Palm Sunday I celebrated mass with a small group of people, three readers, a Deacon, a musician and a cameraman. It was the first time that most of them were physically present at Mass since last Christmas. Some of them had tears in their eyes after the Mass when they realised how much they had missed being present in community and how much they missed receiving communion. For us Catholics the Eucharist is the source and summit of our faith. During the past year we have endured a Eucharistic famine that we never thought we would experience in our lifetime. Hopefully, it is a nightmare that we can put behind us soon. Yet despite our discomfort and our sense of loss it will, I believe, help us to realise the gift that we have in the body and blood of Christ present in the bread and wine. It is our spiritual sustenance and nourishment. It is food for our journey through this life. Please God, the experience of the last year will help us to deepen and renew our commitment to the practise of our faith.

There are, thankfully, interesting signs through surveys and academic research that quite many people have remained in touch with their religious practise through webcams and through a multitude of Catholic websites that are educational and contemplative in nature. A recent *Amárach Research* survey found that 30% of people in the country are accessing religious services on a regular basis online.

During the past week *The Guardian* newspaper in Britain, a newspaper that is widely regarded as liberal, published an editorial that examined religious beliefs in Britain today. While adherence to a set body of beliefs, found usually in an organised religion, may have dropped considerably over the years, many

people, particularly young people, still refuse to consider themselves atheist. There are still many people who believe in God or at least in some higher being.

The largest bloc of people who didn't follow any organised religious grouping were made up of "*maybes, doubters, and don't knows*", plus a group who did believe in "*something there*". The younger the cohort, the smaller the proportion of atheists. The author of the editorial references the poet Philip Larkin from his poem '*Church Going*'. Larkin wrote that churches have an aura because they satisfy in us "*A hunger ... to be more serious*". Spiritual hunger is part of the human condition. It will find outlets and means of expression in the years to come even in an increasingly secular western world.

We as a Church must be ready to answer that hunger, be poised to help people understand the power of communion, of being together to celebrate Christ's presence among us and receive Christ's presence in the bread and wine. Jesus, himself, gives us an indication of how we might do that in tonight's gospel by getting down on his knees and washing his friends and disciples' feet. His example of service to others, of love in action, is a powerful witness to what we should be about as his followers. Our witness to genuine service, not lip-service, can help to bring people back into our churches. If we welcome them no matter what their past, their background, their frailty, then we will bring Jesus into a world that cries out for authentic love and genuine compassion.