

DEBATE

The Mass is essential for the common good

ECCLESIA

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In evaluating the suspension of Masses “for the common good”, Catholics are divided into three groups: 1) those who approve, because for them the transcendent plays no role whatsoever in the human battle against the coronavirus and they consider miracles to be merely superstitions; 2) those who disapprove because the Mass has a civic value of producing horizontal solidarity that is very useful in difficult moments such as the

present crisis; and 3) those who disapprove for more radical reasons, because they believe that even in fighting contagions and epidemics the true battle is taking place in Heaven, with effects that echo here on earth.

The true response should begin with considering what the Holy Mass is and whether it has by its nature a public dimension. The Holy Mass is Heaven that descends to earth. In the Eucharistic sacrifice the death and resurrection of Our Lord is sacramentally renewed, by which He has renewed creation after sin. As the Catechism teaches, the Mass “re-presents the Sacrifice of the Cross, because it is its memorial and applies its fruit.”

The Mass has sacrificial effects because in the Eucharist supernatural life is conferred. It unites to the Church, that is, to a community that is stronger than our human communities because it is not constituted by us but rather we are constituted by it. This union involves the faithful of the Church militant here on earth and also the souls in purgatory who are in a state of purification, and also the souls in heaven who are justified and glorified: the Mass thus inserts us into the communion of saints.

In his 2003 Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia de Eucarestia*, John Paul II lamented the fact that the Mass is often considered as a “convivial and fraternal meeting” and not as a Sacrifice with abundant spiritual fruits. It’s true the Mass is a banquet, but it is a sacrificial banquet “marked by the blood shed on Golgotha.”

Every Mass, as the Council teaches, has by its nature a “public and social disposition.” Paul VI taught in *Mysterium Fidei* that the sacrifice of Christ that is renewed in the Mass is universal – it is offered for the salvation of the entire world: “from this Mass there derives a great abundance of particular graces, to the benefit of the priest himself as well as the faithful people and the entire Church, and even for the whole world.” And this occurs even when the Mass is offered in a so-called “private” way because even in the case where for some reason there cannot be an assembly the Mass retains its public significance and contributes greatly “to the salvation of the human race.”

Benedict XVI, in the introduction to his collected works on the liturgy, adds the cosmic dimension to this public significance: “the liturgy is celebrated towards the vastness of the cosmos, it embraces it together with creation and history. This was the significance of facing east during prayer: the Redeemer, to whom we offer our prayer, is also the Creator, and so in the liturgy love for Creation is always present as well as responsibility for it.” God is the Creator not only of the physical cosmos but also of the

human cosmos, of society.

The universal, public, and social character of the Mass and the Eucharist centred on the “new creation” explains why it is not only a matter of private devotion. The Church has expressed her faith in the Mass through various external expressions, such as for example the formularies for Masses in the time of pestilence, in proximity to conflicts of faith and during wars. This also explains the sense of holding Eucharistic processions to call upon the divine protection over a city or public adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. If even in a “private” celebration the Mass and the Eucharist express sacramentally and truly a universal salvific value, all the more should the Church promote the participation of the people and external manifestations of Eucharistic faith. There is no contrast between the invitation of many popes to priests to celebrate the Mass in private daily and its visible public presence.

The public significance of Mass as a supernatural guarantee of the common good is also taught by Benedict XVI in the concluding paragraphs of the 2007 Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*. He writes, “The union with Christ that is realised in the Sacrament also enables us to have a new level of social relationships: the mystique of the Sacrament has a social character. In fact, the union with Christ is at the same time union with all others to whom He gives himself.” The Eucharist has such a public significance that it impels people to a courageous commitment to serving the structures of this world through the social doctrine of the Church: “in this precious patrimony, stemming from the most ancient ecclesial tradition, we find the elements that orient the behaviour of Christians with profound wisdom in the face of pressing social questions.”

Unfortunately secularisation has made us accustomed to thinking of everything as autonomous: technology is autonomous from science, science is autonomous from politics, politics is autonomous from ethics, ethics is autonomous from religion....We think that each step is able to achieve its own ends independently, and arguing otherwise is seen as fundamentalism. But the Final End is not the last step of a staircase that is added on to the previous one, rather it coincides with the First Principle. No intermediate step can do it alone: “Without me you can do nothing.”