

Quick Random Thoughts on Locked Church Doors and Prohibition of Public Masses As Measures to Stop the Spreading of COVID-19

Beloved brother and sister in Christ,

Greetings! I hope you are firmly rooted in Christ with undaunted faith, especially during this time of COVID-19. This week, and especially today, I have interacted with a couple of people, who are devastated by the directives to lock up churches and not celebrate Mass publicly even on Sundays, as a measure to curb the spread of the virus. This is particularly testing especially during this peak season of the church's liturgical year and life. Tomorrow we enter into the Fifth Sunday of Lent (formerly Passion Sunday when the statues and cross in the churches are covered with purple). Next comes the most holy liturgical week of the church: Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week with the Easter Triduum (Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday) blossoming into Easter Sunday.

Many people are asking: how can the church run away from coronavirus, especially at this time? Does it mean that the church has no faith; etcetera? The lay faithful feel abandoned by the church. At face value these questions are very sound. Perhaps we need to look at this situation in a different light. Who is the church? What is the church? Does our daily going to church on Sundays make us truly the church, body of Christ, family of God? Or a congregation of people coming to sing, dance, feel good; then leave the church without connecting with each other, knowing each other and caring for each other even during the Mass?

Scripture tells us that we are the church of God; God's church is God's gathering and reconciling of humanity and the entire creation ("things in heaven and things on earth") to the divine self in and through Christ, "making peace" [that is, establishing wholeness] by the blood of his cross (Col 1:20). It tells us that we are the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12-30); we are "God's building and God's tilling" (1 Cor 3:9). Individually (1 Cor 6:19) and together (Eph 2:21-22) we are the Temple where God dwells in the Spirit. Jesus gathers us into his one body by breaking down all anthropological barriers creating one new humanity in himself (Eph 2:15; Gal 3:28). We are branches of him the Vine (John 15:1-17). As a warning, it equally tells us that God does not dwell in works made by human hands since God created and owns the entire universe (Acts 17: 24-25).

What comfort and lesson do we draw from all this? I think the closure of the churches may be God's way of asking us to return to our roots, to our scriptural roots about what it means to be church. It invites us to make faith-filled effort to believe that in God we live and move and have our being. No door can be closed to our reaching God and to God reaching us. The risen Jesus reached his disciples gathered behind locked doors in Jerusalem for fear of the Jewish authorities who had crucified him (John 20:19-21, 26). He did not ask them to leave that room. Rather he asked them to wait there till they were strengthened with power from on high, the Holy Spirit. This Spirit would transform them from fearful persons into faith filled disciples and launch them on the bold and unstoppable mission of proclaiming the gospel, assured that Jesus himself would be with them "always till the end of time" (Matt 28:20).

Concerning where and how to pray: Jesus tells us that when we pray we should close the door; enter into our inner rooms, into the depths of our hearts and pray to God there. That the God who puts the good thoughts in our hearts, in the first place, hears and answers our prayers in the depths of our heart (Matt 6:5-6). Mary heard God's word; she stored them in her heart, not in the church or at grottos, and pondered on them there. "Blessed are those who hear God's word, keep it (store it in their hearts) and bring forth fruit in abundance." Mary did this and brought forth everlasting fruit, gave birth to Jesus, the fruit of her womb (as we pray in the Hail Mary), the Saviour of the World (John 4:42) and the only name by which we may be saved (Acts 4:12),

Where do these random thoughts lead us? We need to realise that we are the church and that no human being can close or lock up that church, except ourselves. We can attend Mass daily and even every Sunday, receive Holy Communion, and yet not be or see ourselves as the church of God: God's gathering of humanity to the divine self in Christ. We may attend church, yet not recognize in our gathering even inside the church that we form the body of Christ. Paul tells the Corinthians that when they meet to eat their food according to their rank, tribe and so forth and do not discern, understand that all the people gathered constitute the body of Christ, they are eating their own supper not the Lord's Supper and consequently, they are eating and drinking judgement to themselves (1 Cor 11:1-34).

Today we interpret this passage as referring to unworthy reception of Holy Communion. This was not Paul's way of understanding the body of Christ. For him Christ's body are believers that Christ has united in himself as integral members of his body. In that body every part is equal, none exists for itself; each part exists in function of others. In other words, every part of his body is Eucharistic, living for and giving itself to others; to enable other parts to live and have fullness of life: namely, the ability to be and do what God intended or created each to be and do. Christ into whom we are configured at baptism as prophet, priest and king with an indelible, unchangeable mark, is a Eucharistic Christ. In him we are a Eucharistic people; we need to bear that in mind as our true character and identity. With or without church buildings that identity remains because we remain always in Christ like living and fruitful branches of his vine. If we cut ourselves from him, we die and cease to bear fruit. No human agent or creature can cut us off from Christ, or lock Christ out of our lives and make him inaccessible to us. It is a matter of faith. So let us rejoice that this pandemic of COVID -19 has helped us to return to our gospel roots. Similarly national disasters helped the Israelites to remember who they were as God's covenanted people.

One final word. Do we notice that Jesus did exactly what he asked us to do when we pray? We are told that he spent whole nights in prayer with God, not in the Temple or Synagogue, but on the mountains, or in the garden; that is, in places created by God, not in those built by human hands. On the mountain, he communed with God and even with Moses and Elijah about his mission or exodus in Jerusalem (Luke 9:28-36). He does not ask us to go to mountains to pray, because many of us have no mountains and it may be dangerous to get there even if we had one. Rather he asks us to go to where no one can prevent or disturb us, where none can say, I do not know how to get there; or have no means of transport to get there. He asks us to shut out all that would distract us, enter into our hearts and there pray to

God our Father in that secret, one to one. God who sees, who is with us in that one-to-one place hears and answers our prayers. We do not need loud bands, the terrorism of the microphone and the cacophony that has become the bane of most of our worship today for God to hear us. Our God is not like Baal to whom we must scream and shout or he would not hear us (1 Kgs 18:26-29).

Finally, finally! This pandemic helps families to stay together in their Sunday worship and maybe in all their prayers. Parents will have time for their children and assume the God-given responsibility to accompany them during the worship and explain to them the different parts of the Mass. We hope so. We recall that the Jewish religion of all the ancient religions was first and foremost a way of life and a religion of the family starting with the Passover meal (Exod 12:1-11) which foreshadowed our Lord's Supper. Today we call it Mass. Each family was to celebrate it, and if a family was too small to finish the sacrificial lamb they were to join with another family (vv 13). The early Christians celebrated the Lord's Supper in private homes, what biblical scholars call "house churches" (cf. Acts 2:46). A number of the key house churches were owned by women (Mary the mother of John Mark: Acts 12:12; Lydia: Acts 16, 5, 40). Or married couples (Pricilla and Aquila: Rom 16:3-5).

In view of all this, we need not protest too much over locked church buildings. We need rather to ask pardon for ourselves and for others, especially Christians, who have shut their ears to what Jesus tells us about our God-given identity and worth, that we are his siblings; about where and how we are to pray, and that we are to relate to one another as his co-siblings and joint or corporate members of his body. The current situation where we feel deprived of church to worship reminds us that most of Jesus' memorable teachings in the gospels took place in private homes: Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-42); Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10); Matthew/Levi (Matt 9:9-13; Mark 2:13-17); Simon the Pharisee and the woman who was a sinner (Luke 7:36-50); the tax collectors and sinners whom he welcomed and dined with and which gave rise to the parables of the lost sheep, lost coin and prodigal son (Luke 15); the wedding at Cana in Galilee (John 2:1-11). There are also memorable stories of Jesus meeting one on one with individuals: Nicodemus (John 3:1-21); the Samaritan woman (John 4:3-42); the Syrophenician or Canaanite woman (Matt 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30); the woman in the crowd (Luke 11:27-28); Mary of Magdala (John 20:11-18). The Last Supper itself in the Upper Room was in the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark (cf. Mark 14:51-52; Acts 12:12). It became the gathering place for the disciples in Jerusalem; being mostly from Galilee, they needed a place to stay in Jerusalem.

So sister and brother, instead of lamenting that COVID-19 has shown up the church for its lack of faith by depriving us of a church place to worship (forgetting that we ourselves are the church of God), let us see it as God-given opportunity for us to return to our gospel roots and find out, understand and celebrate the kind of worship that Jesus requires of us as members of his body. To "worship" in the Bible and in Jesus' view is to surrender one's entire being to God. It is "neither in Jerusalem nor on this mountain" the mountain of Samaria but in Spirit and in truth (John 4:20-24). We do not seek God for such true worship. Rather it is God who "seeks" us (v 23). Because unless God sought us, first and always, there is no way we could find God. God has sought us in a way that makes it impossible for us ever to lose sight of him

or be separated from him. He has sought us by becoming one with us, substantially and consubstantially one with us in Christ (“The word became flesh”; John 1:14); and by making us siblings of Jesus, God’s flesh and blood children in Christ (John 1:12-13). Jesus has united us to himself as inseparable members of his one body and fruit-bearing branches of his vine.

So COVID-19, where is your victory? Where is your sting? Where is your ability to destroy our true worship of God? Thanks be to God who has used you to remind us of who we truly are in God and of what it means for us to be church. We are God’s own gathering and reconciling of humanity and creation to the divine self in and through Christ. We now understand better what God expects of us as his true worshippers: people who, individually and together allow God to seek and find them; people who abandon their former ungodly ways of life (as the Samaritan woman did); people who make God’s will the food that sustains them and the driving force of all they do and seek in life. People who are true worshippers in Jesus and who with him and in him say, “My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to complete his work” (John 4:34; 17:4): God’s will in my life, in the life of my family and in our life together as God’s family, the church. Because we are God’s family, God has entrusted to us the ministry of reconciliation, the ministry of serving as God’s ambassadors to gather, reconcile and unite all peoples to God (2 Cor 5:16-21). To God be endless glory and praise for forever.

Brother, sister, this reflection is done in a hurry. I am trying to get it out before the Fifth Sunday of Lent in the hope that it will give consolation, inner joy and freedom to us to worship God in Spirit and in truth (that is, in the only true and genuine way that God seeks and wants worshipers to worship him). I hope you will get something out of this reflection, which some of the people I interacted with today asked me to put in writing. Above all, I hope this reflection will help you to assume the responsibility to be church, a living member of the body of Christ; to assume personal responsibility to be this church not only on Sundays but as a total way of life in Christ. Against such worshippers, there can be no locked churches. It is a matter of faith.

On a more practical level, since we are not independent marketers in the body of Christ but people called to worship God together, I list below the channels where one can attend Mass through the media. Hopefully with this foregoing reflection, our attendance at such a Mass will be more meaningful; it will make us more committed to be church, living and fruitful members of the body of Christ. He has risen from the dead once and for all, never to die again; before him every power and force in heaven and on earth is subject under God. Nothing can destroy the church, the body of Christ because that body has risen from and conquered the greatest of human enemies: death.

Happy remaining season of Lent and forthcoming Easter and season. Let us listen with faith and joy to Jesus who tells us over and over again: “Fear not”. “I have overcome the world” (John 16:33), “the world” here being all dehumanising and death-dealing forces, including COVID-19. Let us listen to him as he tells us “I am with you ALWAYS till the end of time” (Matt 28:20). As we listen in faith and joy, let us carry out boldly with zeal the mission he has lovingly entrusted to us to “Go out to the whole world and proclaim the good news”

(Mark 16:15); the good news of God's salvation, reconciliation of all peoples to the divine self; the gospel of being church, God's own building which no creature in heaven or on earth can lock up or destroy. To the God who loves us in ways we cannot even imagine, to the immortal and invisible God, be glory and praise forever and ever. Amen.

Available Masses on the Media During the COVID 19 Pandemic

1. Catholic Television Abuja (CTV): Throughout Nigeria, West Africa, Central Africa and South West Africa

-**Daily:** 6.00AM, 12.00 NOON and 6.00PM

-**Sundays:** 8AM *and on AIT* 12.00 NOON and 6.00PM

-CTV will stream all its Masses on Facebook and can be watched worldwide.

2. Lumen Christi TV Broadcasting from Lagos

- DSTV Channel 350,

- On Mobile Devices, GSMs, Laptops, Desktops

-Simply Download their apps.

-Watch on their website: lumenchristitv.com.ng; also: www.chrismasslagos.com

Mass Times:

Daily: 12 noon (live); rebroadcast 10.00pm

Sundays: 8.30am live; rebroadcast 10.30pm

Sacred Triduum: Lumen Christi TV will also broadcast the Chrism Mass, Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday Celebrations.

3. See also **EWTN: 5.30am, 1.00pm, 730pm.**

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