

Why have Mass with no one there?



By Christine Rousselle

With public Masses suspended in over 100 dioceses across the United States, many Catholics have been told to stay home, make a spiritual communion, and maintain a prayer routine until the coronavirus pandemic passes.

Masses are still being celebrated privately, but what does that mean? What is the significance

and power of Mass without the laity present? CNA spoke to experts to get a better understanding of why Masses celebrated in private are spiritually beneficial to all Catholics.

The Mass “is not something we do,” said Fr. James Bradley, a professor of canon law at the Catholic University of America.

“We participate in the Mass when we come to the Mass, either as priest or as people, but it’s first and foremost the action of Christ. The Catechism says that Christ is the principal actor in the liturgy, so this is something that the Lord does and in which we participate, because we participate in His life through baptism.”

Catholics participate in God’s communion with the Church whenever Mass is celebrated, whether they are physically present for it or not, explained Bradley.

Mass is “not something that the priest does as a private individual. He does it as a minister of the Church, involving the whole of the Church. Every Mass that is celebrated, anywhere at any time, is for everyone who is part of the Church.”

Bradley said the language of the Mass as illustrates that it is never never a solo activity for the celebrant.

“We talk about the angels and saints and they all are always present in every celebration of the Mass, the whole of the Church is present on earth, present in heaven,” he said. “So, in a sense, the priest is never alone when he stands at the altar. He’s always surrounded by the clouds of witnesses.”

Fr. Thomas Petri, a theologian and the vice president and academic dean of the Dominican House of Studies, trains Dominicans preparing for ordination to properly celebrate Mass. He said that Mass is about God, not the people.

"The Mass is never, should never, be seen as something that's about me as the priest or something that's about the parishioner or something that's about the community," Petri stated.

"It's about the adoration and the worship of God and giving him the glory and in that, because that's what we were made to be, to do. That's how we are fulfilled and that's how we become happy and holy and more fully alive as human beings."

"It may seem to many that the Mass is purely a sort of performance of worship of God and for one's own spiritual benefit for the benefit of parishioners," Petri said. And while the spiritual value aspect is certainly part of it, "it's not the only thing, and I would say it's not even the primary thing."

"The primary thing that the Mass does or is, is that it's the sacramental representation of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross," Petri stated. "It's the way Christ has deigned or willed that the effects of His sacrifice between the graces of His sacrifice, His suffering and death, but then also His resurrection would be made manifest."

Every time Mass is celebrated, explained Petri, "you are present sacramental at the cross of Jesus Christ and the outpouring of graces of the paschal mystery are flooding into the world."

This is true regardless of the number of people who are physically present for the Mass, he said.

"Every Mass has an infinite, spiritual value to it, because it's the exact same value of the cross of Jesus Christ, which it represents."

Fr. Bradley characterized the Mass as something very different from Protestant worship services, because Mass is "our participation in the offering of God the Son to God the Father in God, the Holy Spirit," not just "a kind of horizontal relationship where we stand before God and we offer worship or we offer sorrow for our sins."

While there are aspects of worship and contrition in the Eucharistic liturgy, Bradley said the Church's sacramental participation in the life of Christ is the key differing factor.

"So, for Catholics, not being able to participate in the Mass, it's serious," Bradley said, "because they can't just simply sit at home and do what they would otherwise do in church, the way Protestants would see that worship in church as being something which is them presenting something to God, either sorrow or joy or thanksgiving."

Those things, said Bradley, "can be offered anywhere at any time," but "in the Mass, we do something greater than that."

Petri agreed, telling CNA that Catholics should never consider Mass a performance, as it is not about them.

"The Mass is efficacious and powerful," he said. "If you celebrate it according to the ritual that the Church has laid down, the Mass isn't a show because it's not something we have invented. It's not meant to be entertainment. Even though in the 21st century we all like to be entertained."

Instead, Mass should be viewed as worshipping God "the very way he wants to be worshipped, the way he wants to be adored; which is to say through the suffering, death, and resurrection--the sacrifice--of His Son, Jesus Christ."

"We do not have a right to expect to be entertained at Mass," said Petri. "You don't have a right to in fact worship God the way we want to worship God. In the Bible and in tradition, God always tells us how we are to worship Him. And the Mass is how he wants to be worshiped."

Both Petri and Bradley expressed sorrow and dismay at the widespread suspension of Masses, but both priests said they understood why the actions were taken, even if they are upsetting for many Catholics.

“First of all, the Church always wants to take care of her flock. And that means that sometimes she has to do things which she wouldn’t want to do, but which are necessary,” Bradley told CNA. He characterized the suspension of publicly celebrated Mass as “ultimately an act of solicitude” and “a kindness of the bishop.”

“He’s trying to protect his flock, and it’s an extraordinary circumstance,” he said. “It’s not a giving in, it’s not a concession to civil society. It’s the bishop acting responsibly on the advice of civil society when it’s offered, when it presents a reasonable law.”

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