

A voice from the Lutheran world

From a waiting church to an outgoing Church

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The reflections in this article on the role of the Church in the pandemic have as their context the strong secularization of large parts of European society and go well beyond the months of the lockdown. The author is the chief pastor of one of the main Lutheran churches in the city of Hamburg (Germany). His parish is located in the city center, between offices and shopping centers, but this does not at all mean that the church is also at the center of life.

I think that the changes which have taken place because of the Coronavirus are so profound and serious that we will not be able to go back to how things were before or see normality easily established because of the way things are at the moment. There will be no moving forward by going back to the past, just as there will be no future in putting everything into reverse.

There are, in my opinion, two crucial questions that the pandemic poses to the Church: how is the crisis changing the Church? And where can we meet the Lord at this time? We are called to scrutinize the signs of the times and to ask ourselves what the Spirit of God is saying to us through them. What do we have to say goodbye to because things will no longer work out to what we were used to? And where can we see spaces for new opportunities instead?

Empty churches - a consequence of the pandemic

An image through which, beyond all appearances to the contrary, churches can discover new opportunities seems to me to be that of the empty churches. As is usually the case with any good picture, it also shows much more than it lets on at first glance.

First of all, what we are witnessing seems to reproduce the reality we find ourselves in during this pandemic. The churches are empty because religious services are not permitted and parish life has stopped. It is precisely by accepting this that the Churches are able to recognize their responsibility for the good of civil society. Celebrations should not endanger people's health, particularly those who are most vulnerable and defenseless. The very fact that church doors are closed highlights how dangerous the virus is and how it has almost completely prevailed over what until recently was considered normal.

Empty churches - an invitation to creativity

However, the image of empty churches could also be interpreted as being an expression of a long and widespread crisis. The disturbing question could be: does the current situation reveal what certain studies have long predicted about the future of the Churches? Is the pandemic even accelerating this process? What should be done if the exception were to become the norm, that people will not return because they have gotten used to not going to church or because they may not feel that they are missing something?

According to the Jesuit, Bernd Hagenkord, we are currently experiencing the preview of a progressive estrangement of people and society from the Church. If the buzz of religious activities concealed the crisis or allowed the churches to lull themselves into a false sense of security, then the onset of the lockdown has made this to no longer be the case.

As a kind of anticipation of things to come, the current situation allows us to glimpse what the ecclesial reality will be in a few years' time. Instead of being caused by the pandemic, what we will see will be the result of the secularization, individualism and privatization of religion that has come to be typical of many European societies. This has had an impact on all the Christian confessions and brought their purpose into question. It should also be noted that in recent decades all the Christian denominations have no longer been able to attract people with the message of the Gospel and to guarantee the transmission of the faith from one generation to another.

Not infrequently, church buildings have become a kind of backdrop of our cities. They are still part of the urban landscape, but the ancient stones no longer speak. Until now, the Churches considered it sufficient to respond to crisis with structural adjustments. But if they look at their own situation with a sense of self-criticism and honesty, they should admit that even before the Coronavirus many churches were never filled and that the ecclesial message hardly reaches people beyond a small circle who still feel a strong bond with their Church. However, in saying this, I do not want to deny that even today there are living and flourishing parishes, but the truth is that they are an exception. As a rule, in many communities attendance figures are quite low and falling. In short, the signs of the times clearly indicate a growing alienation from the Church.

This is neither new nor surprising. People like Pope Francis have repeatedly called for missionary creativity and a 'rebooting' of the Churches. Instead of setting sail for new shores, ecclesial action is often characterized by a self-sufficient or even resigned effort to maintain the status quo.

It is believed, and this is the basic error, that the Church can be satisfied with attending to those who still willingly participate in liturgical and parochial life in the classic sense. In reality, however, the Church is not sent only to those with whom she is in contact anyway, nor can she give up in the face of the fact that Christianity is hardly ever encountered in the secular sphere. According to the Christian vision, in fact, there is not simply a land "without God" outside of the Churches but God can also be encountered in the reality of the world. Consequently, the Church has the task of sharing the Gospel with the whole world (cf. *Mt 28; Mc 16*). The crisis would therefore require an in-depth reflection of the Churches on their mandate and a rediscovery of mission as a fundamental dimension of being Church.

Empty churches - a call to live outwards

In my opinion, the image of the empty church can give rise to a third interpretation: to show

that we - as pastors, pastoral workers and community members - are currently needed in other places. In fact, we find ourselves celebrating worship elsewhere (cf. *Rm 12*). We are not in church because we are busy looking after people in our families, in our neighborhood. We are not in church because we are helping, advising, praying, while we are silently present in the daily life of the people who have been entrusted to us.

At least that is our experience at St. Peter's as the main church in Hamburg.

The restrictions imposed by the spread of the pandemic have been similar to the emergency braking of a vehicle moving at high speed. Two things seemed important to us from the beginning: to stay in touch with our parishioners and to offer them ways in which they could celebrate Sunday by themselves in their homes.

To maintain contact with them, we have, like many other parishes, printed a newsletter with information and aids for home celebration and this is delivered every Friday by post or digitally. To help people focus on the celebration of Holy Week and Easter we also produced videos and podcasts.

The experience of being a Church-community, even at a distance, is based on some assumptions:

- the communion of saints, which we confess every Sunday in the Apostolic Creed, unites us even when we are physically distant according to the promise of Jesus "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am among them" (*Mt 18, 20*). This is a fundamental experience that we are rediscovering in this time.
- The emergency situation is also an opportunity: in line with the priesthood of all the baptized, we have again learnt to worship God in our homes. We have also set out to encourage and enable the faithful to celebrate the liturgy alone.
- In order to experience communion in the Spirit, even in circumstances that temporarily prevent us from being together, celebrations in church continue to be fundamental. Thus, every Sunday, we have celebrated the service behind closed doors at 10 am.
- This is not a "new normal" but an emergency. Social distancing is a proper expression of solidarity in the midst of the pandemic, but it is not normal.
- There can be no Church without a physical communion in faith and without personal encounter.

So, in a short time, we went from a community setting that focused on *to come* to a structure of *to go*. More than ever before we have to evaluate ourselves in terms of the circumstances and needs of the people. Parishioners have expressed their feedback through emails, phone calls and letters and a lot of it is positive. In this way, we the ministers at the service of a church in the city center, hitherto frequented daily by thousands of people who generally had little contact with the pastors, have now found ourselves interacting with a much greater number of parishioners in a lively and personal way.

The potential of the crisis

This new vision that gives ecclesial action a different direction offers the Churches, in my opinion, a great opportunity to learn new things in the current crisis and for the future: it is no longer enough to wait for people to come to our celebrations; rather, it is the Church that must move towards people to meet them in their respective contexts and spheres of life. In fact, this must be the fulcrum of its evangelizing mission.

Bringing the Gospel into people's daily lives is not an optional activity but a direct consequence of the Christian faith. It is therefore necessary to have an approach that focuses on going out rather than 'waiting on'. This does not mean replacing what has been done so far, but completing it. Naturally, all the usual expressions of ecclesial life - from celebrations to sacred music, from formation to accompanying people and to the diaconate - are also open to people who rarely have contact with the Church. In general, however, those who happen upon the Church by chance or have only a very limited interest in it are often not taken into account in these activities. Here lies an important and innovative opportunity which is offered by the current crisis: we have moved towards people according to a logic of *to go*, we have made contact with them and offered new forms of ecclesial communication.

This would be an image of the Church that I like and perhaps there is the potential here for what will come after as well. It is not to be presumed that the life of the Church will suddenly flourish again after the pandemic. Perhaps the churches will remain empty and the number of members will continue to decline. There seems to be no way to avoid this. But we could take this crisis as an opportunity to dialogue between different confessions about where we can meet the Lord in our time and how he shapes us as a Church. Perhaps at that point then we might be surprised and discover unprecedented pointers towards greater communion and unity. This shared reflection on the situation of the Church should not take place with an attitude of those who "know" speaking to those who "do not know", but should consist in asking questions, with profound listening and knowing how to sometimes face uncertainty, with courage to experiment with new ways even though we do not know in advance if they will be successful.