

Lasting effects of COVID-19?

JOHN SWANN

John Swann, retired priest of the Archdiocese of Adelaide ponders what the future holds for the Church post COVID-19.



Many of us would have seen Pope Francis delivering his *Urbi et Orbi* blessing to us all in St Peter's Cathedral on Easter Sunday – he stood as a lonely small white figure in the huge empty expanse of the Cathedral.

As it was for many of us, celebrating the Easter Ceremonies without a congregation was a rather surreal experience. The closure of our churches, the difficulty of ministering to the dying and even visiting the sick at home or in nursing homes has been hard to accept. And what about Masses in our schools and colleges? The need to stay at home, as we have been urged, may have meant for some more opportunity to read, hopefully not too much time wasted in front of the TV screen. And of course let's not forget the financial impact on our parishes and dioceses.

But what of the future?

We don't know when the many restrictions will be lifted. Some suggest not until a successful vaccine is developed. And that may be 6 or 12 months away!

Even when some restrictions are lifted, attendance at Sunday Mass will be problematic for some time into the future. Really it would be hard to think of a system that poses more dangers of infection and spreading contagion. Not only are people together in a confined space – so much for social distancing – but think of our various practices! Apart from congregating before and after Mass, there are hugs and shaking of hands at the sign of peace, and there are the risks associated

with giving and receiving communion, even if it be simply communion in the hand. Sharing the cup poses added problems, as does the practice of intinction. And perhaps parishioners won't have the freedom to choose where they sit – they may have to be guided by an usher in order to maintain proper distances.

No doubt new rules will have to be developed and strictly enforced.

In the meantime many people have really appreciated the availability of Masses streamed on-line from our various cathedrals and many local parish churches. For many it has been and continues to be a very prayerful experience. Anecdotally I have heard some people say the liturgy on line has been more impressive than in their local church.

Again, what will the future hold? Some may be really fearful of coming back to church, especially if they have health problems. There may be some real challenges to improve our liturgies. There will, I believe, need to be some serious discussions about how we face the future.

We know the COVID-19 will have widespread and long-lasting effects on our economy and many aspects of social life. Hospitality, entertainment and travel will be severely affected for a long time to come. Attitudes to meetings and conferences will no doubt change. Plans for our Plenary Council have already been drastically challenged. And of course our national debt will hang over us for many years to come.

In the meantime as people of faith we are called to be people of hope, called to build up trust and mutual cooperation and support within our communities. Thankfully there have been some positive outcomes from the pandemic in the many examples of social responsibility and Christian charity. May the God of Peace and the Spirit of Wisdom guide us and help us in our endeavours. ☪