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PRAY AND VACCINATE WORSHIP AND PASTORAL CARE IN TIMES OF PANDEMIC IN HUNGARY

By **András Máté-Tóth**

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The major churches in Hungary—Catholic, Calvinist and Lutheran—felt concerned about the Corona pandemic, especially about Sunday services. As in the spring wave, so in the autumn wave, the question of offline/online services was in the center of public communication. It has kerygmatic reasons—especially among Catholics—since, according to Vatican II, the Eucharist is the source and summit of the relationship with God. (Lumen Gentium 11.) Without Eucharistic celebration, congregations are "grace-poor" and priests, too, can feel deprived of their first-order mission and "service-poor." Similarly, Protestant pastors experience and exercise their priestly ministry primarily through Sunday worship, preaching, and the Lord's Prayer. During the pandemic, the highest effort of pastoral ministry can be experienced in the struggle for so called ‘despite services,’ which in my understanding are services held despite of the pandemic situation. Despite restrictions, in spite of technical problems, in spite of everything—the services must take place. If someone should get the idea to measure the degree of secularization by the attendance at mass during the Corona period, the study will most likely conclude that the number of services and the number of participants remain the same, only the form has partially changed.

Rules of the Churches

As a matter of principle, the *Catholic Church* in Hungary kept and still keeps the church buildings open during the day, only the communal services were switched to online. According to the survey, about 40 percent of the parish priests and pastors held online services and various online devotions.¹

¹ All referred data are from the Contoc international research project. <https://contoc.org/de/contoc/>.

The Catholic Bishops' Conference issued an order on March 19, 2020, regarding the services in the church buildings. The public liturgies were paused, the services *sine populo* were to be transmitted online in the form as celebration *cum populo*, with organ accompaniment and homily if possible. The faithful were to be motivated for spiritual communion (*communio spiritualis*), In lieu of communion, prayer texts were offered. The text motivates the faithful for the public service broadcasts, "which make participation in the services possible."

Later in the spring (May 1, 2020), offline services were also approved, subject to compliance with special arrangements; further concretizations were left in the competence of the diocesan bishops. On June 14, the restrictions were lifted. In the fall, the Bishops' Conference repeated its warnings (September 4, 2020), asking for caution and compliance with the precautions, but has not stopped the celebration of the Eucharist.

The Hungarian Reformed Church did not stop the services (March 11, 2020), but called the pastors to limit the number of participants in order to be able to keep the distance and also to comply with other safety precautions, such as disinfecting, wearing masks, etc. Similarly, the Protestant church also opted for the services with few participants. In the Reformed Church, the theology of the Eucharist likewise enabled home services. Bishop István Bogárdi Szabó motivated this with regard to the liturgies on Easter Sunday in a communiqué. He called this special kind of communion a quarantine service and argued with Calvin: "This reign is neither confined to any space nor limited by any scope, so that rather Christ manifests His power wherever He wills, in heaven and on earth ..."² In the second wave, the Reformed Church continued to hold services, under the special conditions, as in Spring.

In a survey in which about 100 priests and pastors from Hungary participated, they were also asked about spiritual communion. About two thirds of the respondents answered that this kind of communion in the online service is a great help for the faithful, although some said that spiritual communion is not understood by many. The understanding of the Eucharist is not affected by this communion, answered about 60 percent of the respondents.

The struggle for 'despite services' was evident in a pastor in a major Hungarian city who confessed his concern in a telephone conversation. Literally, "The faithful are now present online, not in lesser numbers than offline. But will they return to offline services after the pandemic?" We spoke in March, and when I asked him in October that year, he said,

² *Christian Doctrine*, 4.3.1.

"They're back now, but if another online time comes, I'm not at all sure they'll come back." This uncertainty characterizes the people in pastoral care services. Furthermore, we will not have an answer until the end of the second wave, or who knows when?

The models of 'despite services' are very different and show consistency on the one hand and creativity on the other.

Offline Church Service Amateur Broadcast

There is no data collection on what form the services take, but probably the most common solution is for the priest to celebrate the service alone and broadcast it using a webcam. I visited the Facebook account of a Franciscan priest who said daily Mass in this manner every day for weeks. His webcam was set up on the upper right about 5 - 7 meters from the altar, you could see his face from above in semi-profile; not for a single moment could you see his eyes. I would call this solution amateur broadcasting. Calvinist pastors also chose this solution, facing their webcam and speaking into the camera, i.e. to us online participants. Survey data shows that even for this simple solution, many priests and pastors had to greatly upgrade their own IT skills. Seventy percent of responses answered in the affirmative to the question about needing to introduce new routines under these circumstances, but just over 70 % also said they found courage for greater creativity.

Offline Worship Service Professionally Broadcast

Another online atmosphere is created by professionally broadcasted church services. Here, the programs are recorded or broadcast with operators, not only the main celebrant is seen, but also other motifs, even the music complements and underpins the voice of the priest. Professionalism depends not only on money and media professionals, but also on the attitude of the priest or the pastors. If they are close and open to the times of today, they will engage professionals in their pastoral communication. If they are rather out of touch with reality, they will be content with amateur broadcasting.

Online Worship

Especially among Protestants, one finds creative church services that are specially designed and organized for the online world. They are meditations with music and images, they are sermons enriched with cinematic means of design, and they are communicative, addressing and gripping the participants. Perhaps they are more appealing to the younger generation, some of whom already live their lives "online." They cost celebrants more time,

more help from parishioners, and from professionals. But if they are truly Internet-compliant, the messages come closer even to those who are not otherwise worshipers or perhaps belong to the so-called "nones." If one wanted to measure the religious quantities by the number of church service visitors, one might possibly come to the conclusion that the offline routine also has an effect in the online world, but the online creativity also reaches other people, whom Charles Taylor or José Casanova call "Seekers," or spiritual God-seekers.

A Catholic solution is the hybrid service, where the word service is held online, and then after half an hour, the Eucharistic service takes place in compliance with all safety regulations--even outdoors in winter. Around the online word service, a kind of conversation circle developed about the Sunday readings and get-togethers and how to secure community-strengthening relationships in these states of emergency.

Religious Policy

Some in Hungary criticize the representatives of the large Christian churches for not being sufficiently critical in a prophetic way towards the government. It is not infrequently claimed that the government has "bought" them as a side effect of the pandemic. Through the very generous funding and through the increased outsourcing of government tasks to these churches, there is an unspoken understanding that it can rightly expect uncritical support from them. For example, the attitude of these churches during the time of the refugee crisis is interpreted as follows: the churches of the western part of Europe declared solidarity with the refugees and supported an open migration policy of their government; in the eastern part of the old continent, the nationalist self-defense policy of the governments received large-church support. However, church statements slowly became more differentiated and churches also revealed their internal pluralities in public.

Parallel to the public stance of the churches in the refugee crisis, one might have expected that this model would also be evident in the Corona crisis. However, the situation is different. On the political side, although the government's attitude and actions are constantly criticized by the opposition, the pressures of the pandemic tended to have a unifying effect among the population. The churches are not pressed into the political sphere of either/or, nor do they have to force themselves to unequivocally support government policy. Therefore, in accordance with their own mission, they try to offer religious and spiritual interpretations for a meaningful life even under pandemic conditions.

Cardinal Péter Erdő published a "Prayer in the Corona Crisis" in March 2020, in which he praised creation, life, and science, praising God Almighty. "In humility, we ask You

to help the people of science to find the antidotes of the pandemic soon! Give responsible worldview to the superiors of the societies so that they can stop the spread of the virus through appropriate orders and deliver the remedies to those in need." Regarding vaccination, the cardinal said in an interview, "Getting vaccinated is a responsible attitude; I myself have also registered." (Jan. 12, 2021). He quipped about Fake News, according to which Russian vaccination has as a side effect that people will then speak Russian: "If you could learn languages through an injection, I'd gladly stand in line for it even in the winter cold."

Vaccinate and Pray!

In general, all major churches and religious communities advocate vaccination against Covid-19 and motivate their believers to become immune to Fake News. In the church media, a very clear dividing line is drawn between vaccination pros and cons. The Association of Christian Intelligence in Hungary published a pro-vaccination statement on Jan. 15, 2021, explaining that one should not believe the unsettling information that very often comes from "self-serving political interests;" one should put trust in the good will of the scientists. Church voices clearly and unequivocally support government action on vaccination; there is no debate on vaccination issues in the church public sphere, unlike in political forums.

In a presentation, Bishop János Székely (Szombathely) referred to the Vatican statement of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitas personae*, which also considers ethical concerns about vaccine research. "For scientific research and for the production of vaccines and other products, cell lines are occasionally used that are the result of an unlawful act against the life or physical integrity of a human being."³ It is regrettable, the bishop commented, that for medical science almost only efficacy counts and human dignity is sacrificed at the altar of success. Although today's pandemic is a plague, we must not forget how many abortions are performed, how many people in the world cannot feed themselves adequately or even starve to death or have little or no access to drinking water.

No More Offline Exclusivity

Caused by the pandemic, the question of online pastoral care was suddenly at the center of discussions, but we must not be misled by this occasion; the life of Christians and churches was already permeated with online possibilities. Religious and church relationships are increasingly happening and developing in the online space. Just think of the flow of

³ *Dignitas personae* 34.

information in institutions or social networks. Offline life in everyday life, as well as in church matters, are rather or at least more and more refreshing exceptions to the rule. Many think that in order to form a deep conversation or to experience closeness to God together, one needs a shared offline space, a physical closeness. Among the younger generations, this insight is less and less clear; they conduct existential discussions on Facebook or other online platforms. They maintain daily contact with friends and acquaintances who live anywhere in the world. What is generally valid in regard to the Internet, the strong relativization of the importance of the locality of human life, is *mutatis mutandis* also valid in the religious and ecclesiastical sphere. The pandemic, with its painful demarcations, reminds Christians and the churches of the duty of constant *retractatio* about the way of realization of the Kingdom of God among people.

The pandemic and similar catastrophes provoked the churches and theologians to give an apologetic answer to the question: How could God allow all this to happen? The variations of solutions to this question are well known. God put people to the test, God punished them, God is innocent, people bear the responsibility. Yes, people of today do expect the churches to give meaningful, sense-giving answers. Not moralizing and even less politicizing is the primary task of the churches, but credible and honest testimonies that a meaningful life is possible even under catastrophic circumstances. Insights into the Christian, church media show that this apologetics is still a long time coming. One can only hope that it is not an indication of the churches' loss of competence.

The pandemic is drawing the attention of humanity, as well as religions, to a fundamental characteristic of our world today--its vulnerability. Philosophers like Judith Butler and sociologists like Brian S. Turner have been arguing for a decade that the great institutions of humanity are no longer recognized as evident, such as human rights, the sanctity of the person, and the like. Not only are the banking systems, the sych security systems, and the Internet vulnerable, but so is the health of great masses. All major "players" today are called upon to acknowledge this vulnerability and respond to it appropriately. This includes the major Christian denominations, not only in societies where they are among the evident sources of culture and legitimacy of values, but also where they need to reestablish their role in society. The pandemic today provokes once more that the churches and the Christians rediscover their religion and develop options for the future with input from mysticism. Unfortunately, the churches in Hungary and in East-Central Europe are very busy with the political and financial protection of their own institutions and the possibilities and conditions of pastoral work. They rarely find time and inspiration for a profound rereading of

their own normative documents and often adapt their activity more to circumstances than to the sources of revelation. If the pandemic can be viewed as an opportunity for Christians and the churches, it is above all regarding the renewal of faith.