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**An open discussion on the way of life in the post-COVID-19 era**

The entire universal Church is experiencing a feeling of impotence, something somewhat forgotten in this day and age. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the frailties, illusions, instabilities, and failures of our political and economic systems and projects in human society worldwide. We are learning to coexist with the reality of vulnerability on a global scale. There is reason for hope, though, given the unprecedented effort of solidarity in overcoming the consequences of COVID-19 together, both in society and in the Church. Concerns and fears are being raised, regarding the possible misuse of these consequences for selfish political and economic interests. The people of God are called upon to look at all things in a new way, to see them in Christ. God's gifts to us, along with our personal and community responses, are the solution. These responses stem from decisions which are based on discernment in the Spirit. The compassion of the Sacred Heart of Christ toward this world, shared by the people of God, is at the very core of our focus. It is a compassion which reveals the Father's unchanging will to embrace all, and it is the manifestation of the power of the Spirit in those who accept God's call to personally participate in the work of salvation (2 Corinthians 1:3-5). The testimony of the Churches of Europe reflects Europe's contribution to God's love, which shapes its essence, vocation, mission, and way of life.

In these times especially, as they serve Pope Francis – the Bishop of Rome – and in the Holy See's activities, Europe's local churches of different traditions find a sign for the entire universal Church: that God guides everything. This reality allows the faith of the people of God to grow. It is a matter of going back to what is essential: namely that both the present and the future encounters with God consisting of trust, commitment, and bearing testimony in difficult times. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we come to realise the difficult situation our neighbours, specifically Africa and the Middle East, find themselves in. However, we cannot forget Eastern Europe or the situation faced by the Orthodox Churches operating here, be they majority or diaspora. The stance shared by the Conference of European Churches (CEC) and the Commission of the Catholic Bishops' Conferences of the European Union (COMECE) is an example of the solidarity of the Church with secular society. The unity of the Christian faithful in Europe helps in raising awareness regarding the situation faced by the poorest, the marginalised, and those living in the peripheries, including asylum seekers and migrants.

Let us examine our conscience: is secular society now more capable of understanding our local churches as communities and institutions of solidarity, with an inner commitment to the care of health systems, solidarity networks, and human rights closely linked to social and environmental rights and obligations? Is the family the basic preference of our local churches? Is it seen as the foundation supporting the most effective forms of prevention, health care, solidarity, and the ability to face challenges and overcome crises? Can families and the poor testify that the ecclesial community supports and defends them in seeking real paths toward

hope within the ecclesial community itself and with the help of society? Have we listened particularly close to the voices of women, who have been affected by a number of unresolved situations in an unprecedented way?

Among the many stimuli that have emerged, let us focus on those that can give voice to the suffering of the people of God, as they entrust their sorrows to their pastors. Together with them, they seek the desire of the heart of Christ to fulfil the Father's will and to realise the coming of God's kingdom in the power of the Spirit.

## **1. What kind of history will our ecclesial communities pass on to future generations?**

Our common historical memory is preserved in the memory of the Church, in the stories about the lives of Saints and in chronicles. In Europe, generally, the great medieval plagues upset the society of the time, thus leading to its growth as they became an opportunity for conversion. This is an opportunity once more, given the current Coronavirus crisis. Along with unprecedented economic turbulence (unpredictable fluctuations in real estate prices, rents, rising labour costs, debt, the creation of new barriers, and the emergence of new peripheries), we are witnessing the depreciation of the very concept of solidarity and the loss of social consensus. An excessive quest for health seemingly overshadows the efforts made to achieve the salvation of one's soul and the salvation of all, as one would say in classical language. A vision of the future is often lacking. The people of God could, in fact, sense confidence in God's Providence through the Saints, Bishops, priests, and deacons, and even in the spiritual fathers and mothers – a confidence present in those who know how to look to the future, despite the crisis.

Our knowledge regarding technology and health care far exceeds that possessed by past generations. At the same time, we cannot state that our elites are more forward-thinking and exemplary compared to those of the past. They do not offer ideas and visions; their attitude shifts according to demand in the mere pursuit of political interests. A society without values suffers from exhaustion and emptiness. It feels abandoned, hurt, and lacking a universally shared idea. It stands no chance unless it has an identity and a vision. We suffer due to excess, abundance, and superabundance. More and more frequently, we sense that there is no miraculous medicine or quick solution. No technology or government technique can turn into a universal remedy. Our commitment is always present, and it is shaped by freedom. Our future is freedom in the Spirit. The distinguishing trait of Christians is that their starting point is the immensity of God's gift, which is embodied in their daily decision-making process.

Technological solutions, *per se*, do not address the issue of pastoral discernment. This is also true of the relationship between the celebration by the people of God's liturgy and the life and mission of Christians and their experience (*martyria*), the public expression of the worship of God through the personal and active participation in Christ's salvific work (liturgy) and a love which is experienced, committed to and inspired by Christ's example; overcoming all borders by passing through the service of love in society (political diakonia), love for one's neighbour (*charis*), and love in the midst of God's own people (*agape*). There is an urgent need to discuss the changes happening in the life of the people of God, given the impossibility of celebrating the liturgy in public both during and after the pandemic. There are other questions that cannot be avoided either, such as: Do we perceive the implied risk in accepting the lawfulness of the State authorities' decisive intervention in the life of the families and communities without any reservation? Do we perceive the risk involved in passively accepting the mass media's

manipulative practices which eventually shape our social and cultural environment? What are the consequences of our COVID-related liturgical experiment in the parish which focuses primarily on live broadcasting and dispensation? Should online liturgies remain in the life of our parish communities? What are the consequences of these decisions in the lives of both individuals and the entire community of believers? How will this experience affect our future decisions?

## **2. Where to search for the temple of the people of God in the POST-COVID-19 era?**

The temple holds a special place in the Judeo-Christian tradition. It is linked to the place where God's personal presence is among us. The Temple of Jerusalem was God's dwelling. People would go there to pray, priests would serve there (offering sacrifices) and, once a year, the High Priest would address God on behalf of them all. The Jews would not just pray in public or in front of others, but also in private before God alone. Whenever they could not enter a temple or synagogue, in a certain sense they could enter their "virtual" place of worship. They did it in a simple way, choosing to devote the same amount of time and applying the same conditions to prayer (by referring to the same directives to be observed during the practice of piety in a temple or synagogue). They looked in the direction of the temple and thought to themselves: "the sun is setting now. If I pray at the same time as the priests pray in the temple, my prayer will become a sacrifice, combined with the sacrifice or prayers performed in the temple". This is an excellent example of how prayer can cross over the boundaries of space and time. The foundation of participation does not lie in physical presence alone. At the same time, however, one cannot omit the whole mystery of the Incarnation of Christ and the related transformation of man into the image of the Risen Christ. In its most essential part, regarding the bread and the wine (and, therefore, our human corporeity), the liturgy requires a far more complex form of participation and one in which the human and the divine become the new man's single spiritual reality, interfering with the notion of space and time and becoming part of a symbolic language (not a virtual language). However, we should still be concerned with the partial nature and incompleteness of an online liturgy. As far as the integrity of the human being (body, soul, and spirit) is concerned, the *Liturgy of the Hours* is more suitable for the Chinese COVID-19 pandemic situations. It offers the possibility of common prayer, the reading of the Scriptures, and the sanctification of time. *Lectio Divina* is also part of the Church's immense wealth but it is practiced rather sporadically in our ecclesiastical province, as well as in religious or monastic communities. It is practiced in small religious youth groups or in the communities of some movements. The perception of the liturgy is fairly limited to receiving the sacraments. It cannot be reduced to the mere external belonging to a social group or subculture, as we see in groups with a traditionalist focus. The liturgy exposes us to an essential horizon: our expectation of the Lord, which is a common expectation.

## **3. The Eucharist and the assembly of the People of God (*ecclesia*)**

The isolation preventing the common celebration of Easter also affects the personal sphere of our faith's most basic event: Christ's closeness, along with all of God's promises in Baptism. The renewal of the profession of baptismal faith is the underlying attitude of the life of *a new person*, it is the personal closeness of the Lord. As far as we are concerned, it is revealed by

receiving the bread and the wine, transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ; it is revealed in the very assembly convened by Christ, in the importance of singing and in the use of holy water or in our liturgical approach. Yet how does one conceive the respectful closeness required by the very nature of the liturgy, if the assembly (*ecclesia*) is made impossible by epidemiological rules that ban proximity?

In a figurative sense, we have simply transformed the Eucharist into a virtual experience: we have put the cart before the horse, giving primary meaning to the Eucharist. The Eucharist, or Holy Communion, and all things connected to it, is first and foremost the outcome of the encounter between the people of God and the Risen Lord in the midst of the gathered *assembly*. Therefore, the assembly (*ecclesia*) has an essential role to play; it preserves God's anamnesis (memorial) through faith and transforms the bread and the wine offered by the people through the power of the Spirit. Consequently, it transforms all the people of God in the Body of Christ through the invocation (*epiclesis*) of the assembly. Catholics who go to Mass generally see the Eucharist as the heart of the celebration and as being independent of the assembly. They understand the Eucharist as being a distribution of that which is Sacred, entrusted to the ministers of the Church. The assembly (*ecclesia*) is the divine liturgy of the entire Mystical Body of Christ, of both the head and the limbs, i.e. Christ as High Priest, and all those who participate in his Priesthood through the universal and common priesthood. Externally and publicly, they participate inwardly in the worship of God and his Lamb. The bond between the inner and outer forms of worship are expressed and symbolised through a solemn ceremony, namely the liturgical order. Through the latter, the tradition of the Church could preserve all the essential parts of the liturgical process: the presence of Jesus Christ as mediator, the predicament of symbolism (the life of Jesus or the fulfilment of the mission of the Church in the heavenly liturgy), the link between the anamnesis of the Lord's death and the memory of the Saints and with the liturgy's main function: *that of being a sign*. The liturgical order was visibly reflected in the way liturgical texts were composed and in the various ways in which a specific liturgy was celebrated. The dynamics proper to prayers (epiclesis, anamnesis, and the words of consecration), the link between the *lex orandi* and the *lex credendi*, the meaning of mystagogy, the meaning of symbolic language, and the meaning of beauty in relation to the truths of faith, all seem to fall into oblivion.

Why is it that people today have a desire for the Holy Mass? Why is it that they feel dissatisfied, when they are denied the opportunity to attend the Holy Mass and approach the Eucharist? Is it probably because they miss the tangible *assembly* of the faithful, which already in the 'here and now' is the expression of the actual fulfilment of Christ's resurrection in the people of God? By meeting the conditions needed for a worthy and spiritually fruitful Holy Communion, to them the Eucharist becomes the ritualised certainty of personal salvation. The aforementioned basis and meaning of the celebration (the updated representation of Christ's saving act) had been gradually losing its background. The liturgical order of salvation (the sacred liturgy) has undoubtedly become a sociologically meaningful rite. It fulfils its therapeutic function vis-à-vis the unsolvable issues relating to the meaning of human life, linked to birth, to transition periods, to maturation, and ultimately to man's death. Nevertheless, this definition of the liturgy is a disproportionate limitation. The liturgy contains something more: the very secret of salvation, the eschatological fulfilment of the now-present world. It also has another, irreplaceable role in overcoming the temptation of the *catastrophic* concept of *eschatology*, or of human *utopias* (utopia - a non-existent place).

It transforms man's tragic destiny into *anamnesis* (looking to the future with an attitude that includes our entire past, defined as the history of salvation) and *participation* (overcoming

the present through means of Divine-human synergy). Participation allows us to find ourselves before the reality we expect, and it shapes that reality within us – that which *already is and is not yet* at the same time. Finally, we must admit that we have forgotten that the liturgical culmination (the *epiclesis* that causes transformation) has its premise (human existence as preparation) in the catechesis in the proper sense of the word; a gradual strengthening and expectation at the same time. The Greek meaning is twofold: to give direction to a goal and to hold back, in the sense that *you still cannot*. Ultimately the horizon of human time, which opens the eighth day here and now, the eschatological period of world history (*a mystagogy* transforming the objectivity of the Sacraments into a personal attitude, giving it a social and cultural dimension and deepening the unity in the Spirit linked to the multitude of the Holy Spirit's gifts and fruits).

#### **4. Virtual reality and personal proximity**

All of life's situations are considered to be solved positively (*Christianly*) only once their course is completed. This meaning is accepted and absorbed into the people's existence. Nowadays, sharing information is so easy that we are not even able to fathom its impact on human life, also given the amount of information available and due to the idea of visually perceived effectiveness. This is illustrated fittingly by our dialogue regarding what happens to us, once we limit the liturgy to only being a "thing", a broadcast on a screen (*virtual reality*). We do not even realise the fact that we are losing when, firstly, the liturgical event is deprived of its irreplaceable integrity and, secondly, we no longer worry about the loss of the perception of *personal closeness*. Statements suggesting a change be made in the approach to online liturgy and that it is not even adequately prepared, both pastorally and spiritually, are revealing. Pastors could however, end up overseeing a potentially very risky change in the inner attitude of the faithful unless they listen carefully and stimulate deeper discernment. With the end of the drastic restrictions regarding the prohibition of liturgical functions, many began to say that they did not need to go to Mass. The awareness of Sunday Mass as a duty has been put aside by a number of practicing Catholics, with the belief that even with enough time to attend Sunday Mass, a live-broadcast Mass was enough for them. It remains to be seen whether pastors have actually noticed the full depth of the suffering of the people of God or have simply become aware of the personal situations of individuals, families, and communities. A rather remote analogy would be the following: were we to tell grandparents in a nursing home that young people do not come to visit them as a way of saving money, and that contact through Facebook is enough, the elderly would find this very difficult to accept. The *Zoom* space used for videoconferencing obviously has several pre-configured areas of human behaviour that end up standardising communication (from a purely technical point of view). They frame the human experience in predetermined patterns based on opportunity, thus flattening it.

During video connections it is a matter of creating a *Zoom* of the camera and of space, created by the device's ability to bring things closer by using lenses. When the image is converted into the digital form, the display is marked by a loss of image quality. Free connections are available through various applications or services only offering a basic function. Quality connections are mostly guaranteed by services requiring the payment of a fee. Therefore, our human experience using means of communication mostly depends on the poorest connection quality when it is a so-called free of charge supply, otherwise it implies gradually increasing

levels of financial cost. The constant cycle of adaptation to changes happening on the Internet is part of this experience simply because applications require constant updates or the switch to other systems when old ones are no longer supported. In the Church, the event of the Eucharist is not just a mystery of God, it is also a fully-fledged human experience which we can't approach "technically". Posting a positive comment or using a "like" on Facebook, to show we identify with an opinion, will in no way replace a grandchild visiting his or her grandparents.

Currently, this can also be observed in the request to extend this practice and to allow attendance at Holy Mass through live broadcasting, not as a mere exception, but as a best practice. The reason being, that without warning and without catechesis, the difference between these two ways of attending Mass will no longer be perceived. If people get used to home delivery when it comes to services, they will adapt this model mentally to religious "services" so that their needs can be met. It is like buying a pizza and bringing it home, where we then take it right out of the box. People could just as easily expect a priest to consecrate the host for their domestic use. This inner attitude is, in itself, a warning and should be stopped in time. Wherever a community of believers finds it easy to justify not having to gather or to celebrate the sacrifice of Christ together, we begin losing that which makes up the Church. Such a Christian community lacks something essential. This period of waiting therefore, must also be penetrated by pain, a pain we must speak about since it is the sign that an organism is healthy. The tendencies to "theologically" justify this approach are especially risky. The theological reflection on the Eucharist is replaced by "theologising practicalism", which is just as dangerous as academicism. The mystery of the Eucharist cannot be merely limited to the way in which we carry out the priestly ministry during a pandemic: it is not the ministerial priesthood's activity, it is a mystery shared by the entire people of God.

The sanctification of the people of God in the liturgy is indicated and implemented through signs that are perceptible to the senses. Therefore, we must ask ourselves the following question: what meaning does active participation (*participatio actuosa fidelium*) have when the Eucharistic celebration is a live broadcast? This brings us to the core of the problem. The signs we perceive through the senses must always be embraced together, within the community of believers, since that is where their full meaning is revealed. The reason we celebrate the liturgy as an assembly, one formed by the presence of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the faithful, lies in the capacity delivered to the people of God gathered on the path to perfection. It becomes a guarantee one can count on. Furthermore, it should be counted on together as it becomes a shared experience that we partake in the first person and, therefore, also in the context of the social community. Once we are permitted to replace a personal visit with a short message or with a 'Like', something very important happens in us. It underscores a change in the way we understand humanity and in our way of understanding the unity of man and God, within man himself. Wherever we lose humanity, we also lose the possibility of becoming incarnate. Wherever we are no longer brothers and sisters in Christ, wherever Christ is no longer present among us, wherever we do not sing and pray together, wherever we do not share our joy and our suffering, this is where the community ceases to exist. At that point, religion becomes an ideology whose basis lies in the common interests we have in living in this world. But this is not the goal of Christian life. We have a critical attitude when we look at the change implanted by gender ideologies, and bureaucratically introduced into our legal system and cultural identity. From a certain point of view, commercial and consumer-oriented approaches are potentially even more dangerous, since we no longer recognise them for what they are, and in them we confuse the possibility of ensuring the

technical progress of the liturgy by means of a fully-fledged pastoral response in an extraordinary situation where there is a practical ban on public worship. The ministerial priesthood has its reason for existence in serving God by serving the people of God. Such a service makes human relationships more personal, more intimate, and purified from sin. That is the heart of the matter when it comes to live broadcast services. Sadly, we often experience the absence of personal relationships as suffering, together with the people of God, although we justify it theologically in a way that ends up deepening the divide between the common priesthood of believers and ministerial priesthood.

## 5. Rediscovering the Holy Spiritual Communion and the Confession of Desire

Every prayer is also always Christ the High Priest's prayer, who guides us in our own prayer. However, we are not used to calling this prayer *communion* (Christ accepts our intentions, which we give to him, making them part of his sacrifice). If the prayer takes place in the Holy Spirit, then it is also spiritual (spiritual is that which the Spirit is present in). Private prayer, or the private reading of liturgical texts, can therefore be defined as spiritual communion.

We have to learn to fully understand what we refer to as spiritual communion, since this name has become part of the praxis of the Church for reasons the living tradition of the Church, at the time of St. Pius X, took a critical attitude towards. Moreover, it is safe to say that the reform of *precocious and frequent communion* has opposed this spiritual deformation. The previous flattened vision on receiving the Eucharist had a deep impact on Catholic neo-scholastic morality with modern rationalism. In fact, spiritual communion was also referred to as a restriction on receiving Christ more often and regularly by those who took part in the Eucharistic daily celebration, especially in 17th and 18th century convents. The priest who celebrated the Holy Mass also received the Eucharist. Those who attended its celebration were invited to spiritual communion, following a strict evaluation of the inner disposition of the receiving person. This provided an evaluation of the nature of moral purity, unworthiness and sinfulness, an impersonal and unilateral legally pedantic understanding. In particular, nuns were discouraged from receiving the Eucharist due to unworthiness, an uncertainty that was further reinforced by formation, which rightly preferred the need for interiority (conversion of the heart) to the traditional monistic vision, one based on an order of worship that guaranteed the liturgy's objectivity.

In this way of life, the liturgy was understood as the *source and culmination* of the life of the Church, as a sufficient form of life. The difference between spirituality mediated by interiority and spirituality mediated by external forms was so intense, that in some manifestations of Christian ways of life they were polemically set one against the other. This way of life and this conception of the liturgy developed already in ancient times, it was cultivated in monasteries, introduced into liturgical texts, and developed into richly stratified allegories, making the liturgy the preferred form of Christian life. A turning point in this mentality came about with a massive wave of reforms promoted by the mendicant orders (Franciscan and Dominican mysticism) during the Early Middle Age. This was followed by a second wave of reforms carried out by the Jesuit order at the beginning of the modern period, which interpreted the same tradition differently, taking seriously the need to convert hearts and the consequent *personalisation of the objective liturgical event*, including its socialisation. Part of the reform initiated by the Second Vatican Council is this current contradiction (which is often artificially polarised) of two necessarily complementary lifestyles which combines the

mediation of the essence of Christian existence (life in Christ) with *the liturgy*, which cannot be simply limited to the inner attitude of the conversion of the heart or to its institutionally rooted objective nature. Clarifying the meaning of spiritual communion is a current necessity, with arguments that strengthen the understanding of the liturgy as a common event that unites individuals to Christ and to the whole Church, starting from Christian existence.

The conversion of the heart as an inner act of the individual is a necessary and irreplaceable part of the liturgical process, which concerns the whole of man with his body, soul, and heart; man in his social relationships and bonds, with his bodily senses and with his institutional belonging to the Church and to the people of God. The connection between interiority, corporeity, and the institutional nature of a perennial reform of worship within the Church is not optional or simply voluntary, rather it is a pastoral imperative to renew the life and mission of the Church. Therefore, if its full meaning is to be understood, spiritual communion cannot be seen only as an immediate reaction to a given situation: it must become part of the intelligence of a normative tradition. One which indicates a concrete path towards salvation. Therefore, it is important for pastoral instructions and catechesis regarding spiritual communion, and receiving the desired Sacrament of Reconciliation, to lead to a mediation between the internalisation of spiritual life and the credibility of personally guaranteed faith along with its external liturgical manifestations. It is nothing less than the connection between the wisdom of faith – as manifested in the ancient or monastic vision of the liturgy – with modern man's wisdom of faith, with all its new needs regarding personal integrity, as expressed by Western civilization's anthropological shift. If the heart does not change, the institution will never change. Yet, without a renewed discipline of the institutional bodies and forms of the heart, it can easily be misled or cast into illusions. Man is never only his rationality or only his receptivity (be it sensory, emotional, or intuitive), he is also his body, mouth, and hands. Liturgical reform and ecclesiastical reform that would neglect interconnection (harmony within the Spirit) would be doomed to failure in the very essence of what man is: the unity of body, soul, and spirit.

## **6. Rediscovering the Liturgy of the Hours**

The impossibility of celebrating the Eucharist in public together with the assembled people of God is an opportunity allowing us to reflect on the pastoral room that the Liturgy of the Hours deserves. Many serious comments have been expressed, according to which we did not use the pandemic as an opportunity to rediscover prayer that sanctifies the times of the day and the celebration of the liturgical year through popular piety. We can ask ourselves how we can encourage the people of God in finding ways to recite the Liturgy of the Hours together. The Liturgy of the Hours is where we can find the pillars of the theology of Christian prayer. For our entire lives, we will search for the best way to sanctify our work with prayer and to connect our prayer with our work. Let us begin with the premise that the Liturgy of the Hours is deeply rooted in our conception of the Incarnation, which is the foundation of the celebration of the liturgy. The experience of participating in the mystery of the Incarnation in daily life is the essential condition so that the people of God may celebrate this mystery as an experience of the expectation of its fulfilment. In the liturgy, the Incarnation is present as a stage in the imminent transformation of the world into the path opened to humankind by the Resurrection of Christ. It is remarkable to note how the Liturgy of the Hours only penetrates the awareness of the faithful in a limited way. In their eyes, this prayer is either part of

personal piety or it is an official prayer of the Church, destined to religious life in the spirit of St. Benedict's famous axiom: *Ora et labora*. It is explicitly understood to be a prayer for priests and has a clerical veneer to it, such as the breviary of priests for example. Compared to Islam's practice of piety (ritual prayer five times a day, at a certain hour, with little visible testimony to the life of a pious Muslim), we notice how little this prayer penetrates the public. Up to now, Islam has preserved something essential from the tradition of Jewish and Christian prayer, namely the idea of the urgency of sanctifying time. Furthermore, we often fail to realise the richness made available to the entire people of God through the various national languages, especially with the Second Vatican Council's reform.

The duration of the prayer is suitable vis-à-vis the possibilities of contemporary man and, in its structure, it is very appropriate for individual communities. Mentally, we are entirely focused on the celebration and reception of the Eucharist, precisely because it is the culmination of the Mass. The Liturgy of the Hours is a path to that culmination, which is difficult for us to set out on especially if the goal seems far away. Yet, it is exactly that moment of expectation of the Eucharist that intensified our thirst for the Eucharistic bread and our thirst for the blood of Christ offered to us in Holy Communion, through the communion of the Church. This is so necessary for the formation of the people of God that not only goes forward to meet the Lord, but also experiences His coming in everyday life.

## **7. Rediscovering the celebration of Sundays and feasts**

Among other things, the COVID-19 emergency has allowed us to understand more about how common it is for us to identify the celebration of the Eucharist with the reception of the Eucharist. A certain lightness in the conditions with which we approach the Eucharist is quite understandable if we think of them as a sort of pendulum law or, in other words, that throughout history an extreme position of the inner attitude towards the Eucharist was later replaced by a different position. In the pastoral praxis, receiving the Eucharist was conditioned by the need for Confession, every single time, before partaking in Communion. This meant that the idea of receiving the Eucharist as something extraordinary took hold in the religiousness of the people of God, meaning that a lay faithful could only approach the Eucharist once or twice a year. With the passing of time, this tendency was replaced by the practice of regular monthly confession, often linked to the worship of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the promises of graces linked to it. One could speak of an epochal reform begun by Pope Pius X, which brought about the greatest change of piety in the Catholic Church of the second millennium. The pendulum of spiritual perception shifted from the previous position to one which was almost its exact opposite. In other words, that attending Mass was automatically connected to receiving the Eucharist, without expecting one's spiritual inner life to be reflected in daily decisions. The Eucharist has become a symbol of fully-fledged belonging to the community of the Church. This tendency is fair, as long as we do not forget the need for personal moral commitment connected with the quality of spiritual life and of asceticism, accompanied by physical and corporal works of mercy and by love for one's neighbours.

The roots of a possible risk are to be found in yet another field: in the emptying or depreciation of feasts and Sundays, seen as a time of grace given to man. The phenomenon linked to the loss of the meaning of what a festivity is, is due to the cultural changes that end up levelling the difference between a weekday and a feast. The feast is replaced by entertainment, which

is prepared with overabundant care and made-to-measure for each person by the entertainment industry. The pandemic emergency can also be observed from these points of view as a way of testing the quality of our catechesis before Sacraments are distributed, as a way of testing the efficiency of the process enabling life within the Sacraments, as a way of testing the extent to which mystagogy is rooted in our pastoral practice. It is a test of the experience of the current Christian generation with the one and only Priesthood of Christ in the Church, which is visible in the complementarity between common priesthood and hierarchical priesthood, and is something we must pass on to future generations. We must ask ourselves how to establish a link between the thirst for the Eucharist and the thirst for the community. This appears to be the key question, as we search for our perception and we experience the liturgy. We can then ask ourselves the following question: what formation must we focus on for our parishes and local churches, so that they may be prepared to deal with future trials, much like our generation in facing the COVID-19 pandemic?

### **A final summary**

The forms of Christian life in the Church are the outcome of discernment. Every Christian's act of faith is their beginning. The answers to today's questions stem from a single foundation: from Jesus, who comes among us as Love and gives himself to us completely. He gives us the certainty that every sacrifice we make can only find its deep and infinite meaning in Him, and that everything in our lives is carried out by himself. This certainty is always a gift. The main task of the pastor at the head of, and in the midst of, the people of God is to keep watch (being aware of the main temptations the Church must face in this age: the temptation of neo-Gnosticism and neo-Pelagianism) over the willingness of the people to wait for the Lord. In other words, to keep watch over the desire for gift and obedience in the time entrusted to us. The form of ecclesiastical life goes towards *conformity in Christ*. The Pastor is close to the Heart of Jesus: "Follow me again! Look now at the desire of God - the desire of the Heart, do not be afraid to rejoice in my heart, in the depth of my love, to dance in the humility of my heart! I bless you and remain with you. I am your Love". This is where we must begin from.